10¢
DIME
ALL STORIES COMPLETE
SEPTEMBER 1st
WESTERN
NOW TWICE A MONTH
MAGAZINE
NRA
HARRY F. OLMSTED
RAY NAFZIGER
BART CASSIDY
CLIFF FARRELL
RIMROCK RENEGADES
GRIPPING RANGE-FEUD NOVEL BY
WALT COBURN

Blank Cartridge Pistol

REVOLVER STYLE

.22 CAL.

MADE IN 3 SIZES

25c
50c
$1.00

Three new models now out 25c, 50c and $1.00. Well made and effective. Modelled on pattern of latest type of Revolver. Appearance alone enough to scare a burglar. Takes 22 Cal. Blank Cartridges obtainable everywhere. Great protection against burglars, tramps, dogs. Have it lying around without the danger attached to other revolvers. Fine for 4th July, New Years, for stage work, starting pistol, etc. **SMALL SIZE** 6 in. long **25c. MEDIUM SIZE** 8 in. long **50c. LARGE SIZE** 9½ in. long **$1.00. BLANK CARTRIDGES 50c per 100. HOLSTER (Cowboy type) 50c. Shipped by Express only not prepaid.** *Big catalog of other pistols, sporting goods, etc. 10 cents.*

BOYS! THROW YOUR VOICE

Into a trunk, under the bed or anywhere. Lots of fun fooling teacher, policeman or friends.

THE VENTRILO

a little instrument, fits in the mouth out of sight, used with above for Bird Calls, etc. Anyone can use it. **Never fails. A 16-page course on Ventriloquism together with the Ventrilo. All for 10c postpaid.**

CHAMELEONS

25 Cents Each. Shipped By Mail

LIVE, SAFE DELIVERY GUARANTEED

Get one of these most wonderful of all creatures. Watch it change its color. Study its habits. Wear one on the lapel of your coat as a curiosity. Watch it shoot out its tongue as it catches flies and insects for food. No trouble to keep. Can go for months without food. Measures about 4 inches in length. Shipped to any address in U. S. A. by mail. We guarantee safe arrival and live delivery. **PRICE 25 CENTS, OR 3 FOR 50 CENTS POSTPAID.**

Novelty French Photo Ring

Here is a very great novelty in Rings, that is selling in thousands. It is a nicely made ring, finished in imitation platinum, and set with a large imitation diamond. It looks just like an ordinary ring, but in the shank of the ring is a small microscopic picture almost invisible to the naked eye, yet is magnified to an almost incredible degree, and with astonishing clearness. There is quite an assortment of pictures that should suit all tastes. Some are pictures of bathing girl beauties, pretty French Actresses, etc., others are views of places of interest in France, Panama Canal and elsewhere; others show the Lord's Prayer in type, every word of which can be read by persons with normal eyesight. They are interesting without being in any way objectionable. **PRICE 25c, 3 for 65c, or $2.25 per doz. postpaid.** *BIG CATALOG* 10c

REAL LIVE PET TURTLES

25c

Sent by Mail for only 25 Cents

A FASCINATING AND INTERESTING PET

LIVE Delivery Guaranteed

If you want a fascinating and interesting little pet, just risk 25c and we will send you a real live PET TURTLE by mail postpaid. Thousands sold at Chicago Worlds Fair. No trouble at all to keep. Just give it a little lettuce or cabbage or let it seek its own food. Extremely gentle, easily kept and live for years and years. Need less attention than any other pet. Get one or more. Study their habits. You will find them extremely interesting. **Price 25c.** SPECIAL TURTLE FOOD **10c** pkg.

PRICE 10 CENTS

HOTSY TOTSY

THE FAN DANCE

HIT *of the* CENTURY *of* PROGRESS

Who will forget the famous FAN DANCE episode of the Century of Progress Exposition in Chicago? Here it is humorously, cleanly presented in vest pocket form. You flip the pages and **HOTSY TOTSY** comes to life and whirls through her dance, provoking not a sly smile, but a wholesome laugh from all, even the most fastidious. It is a most innocent fun maker that will cause you and your friends no end of fun and amusement. **HOTSY TOTSY the FAN DANCER** measures only 2 x 3 inches – 6 square inches of spicy, piquant entertainment for one and all. **PRICE 10c.** Add 3c for postage. *Big Catalog* **10c.**

Johnson Smith & Co., Dep. 791, Racine, Wis.

MAKE YOUR OWN

RADIO RECEIVING SET

Enjoy the concerts, baseball games, market reports, latest news, etc. This copyrighted book **EFFICIENT RADIO SETS** shows how to make and operate inexpensive Radio Sets, the materials for which can be purchased for a mere trifle. Also tells how to build a short-wave Receiver for hrinking in foreign stations, police calls, ships at sea, etc. **ONLY 15c. postpaid.**

SILENT DEFENDER

Used by police officers, detectives, sheriffs, night watchmen and others as a means of self-protection. Very effective. Easily fits the hand, the fingers being grasped in the four holes. Very useful in an emergency. Made of aluminum they are very light, weighing less than 2 ounces. Handy pocket size always ready for instant use. **PRICE 25c each. 2 for 45c postpaid.**

HOW TO WIN AT POKER

Written by a card sharper. Tells how to win at draw poker. Explains different varieties of poker such as Straight Poker, Stud Poker, Whisper Poker, Misfits, The Freeze-out, The Widow, Buck, Jack-Pots, etc. Exposes the methods used by card sharpers and professional gamblers. 13 Chapters. This book contains a vast amount of information and may save you from being fleeced by crooked players and gamblers. **PRICE 10c Postpaid.** *Big Novelty Catalog 10c*

250 MAGIC TRICKS

An excellent little book containing 250 Parlor tricks. Tricks with cards, coins, handkerchiefs, eggs, rings, glasses, etc. So simple that a child can perform them. Profusely illus.

Price Postpaid 10c: 3 copies 25c.

125 CARD TRICKS and sleight of hand. Contains all the latest and best card tricks as performed by celebrated magicians, with pictures of cards used by professional gamblers. **PRICE 25c POSTPAID.**

Wonderful X-Ray Tube

A wonderful little instrument producing optical illusions both surprising and startling. With it you can see what is apparently the bones of your fingers, the lead in a lead pencil, the interior opening in a pipe stem, and many other similar illusions. **Price 10c, 3 for 25c.**

Fortune Telling By Cards

Book shows how to tell fortunes with cards, dice, dominoes, crystal, etc. Tells the meaning and significations of every card. Several different methods explained and fully illustrated. Crammed full from cover to cover with complete information on fortune-telling. **PRICE 10c postpaid.** *Stamps accepted.*

Good Luck RING

Very striking, quaint and uncommon. Oxidized pinnetal finish; skull and crossbones design; two brilliant flashing imitation rubies or emeralds sparkle out of the eyes. Said to bring good luck to the wearer. **PRICE 25c Postpaid**

HOW TO PITCH Pitch the Fade-a-way, Spitter, Knuckler, Smoke Ball, etc. Lessons by leading Big League Pitchers. Clearly illustrated and described with 56 pictures. **POSTPAID 25c**

Electric Telegraph Set 15c

BOYS! A private Electric Telegraph Set of your own for **15c.** Lots of fun sending messages to your friends. Better still get two sets, hook them up as shown in the directions, for TWO-WAY MESSAGES (sending and receiving.) No trouble at all to operate with the simple instructions that accompany each set. Operates on any standard dry battery obtainable everywhere. With this outfit you can learn to transmit and receive by the Morse International Code, and in a very short time become an expert operator. Mounted on a wooden base measuring 4 x 3 in., first class construction throughout, complete with key, sounder, magnet miniature Western Union blanks, packed in a neat box with full illustrated instructions.

ALL FOR 15c
(without Battery)

OUR BIG catalog of novelties, jokes, puzzles, tricks, etc. 10c.

The Boy Electrician 10c

Add 10c for 64 page book on all about electricity written specially for boys. Tells how to make batteries, dynamos, motors, radios, telegraph, telephone, lights, electric bells, alarms, coils, electric motors. **PRICE 10c ppd.**

NEW VAMPING CARD 15c

NO TEACHER NEEDED – Surprisingly Simple System. Persons having neglected their Musical Education need not despair, for with the aid of our new VAMPING CARD (placing the card upright over the piano keys), you can Vamp away to thousands of Songs Ballads, Waltzes, Rag Time, etc. No knowledge of music is required. After using it a few times, you will be able to dispense with the aid of the Vamping Card entirely. This clever invention costs **only 15c ppd.**

BIG ENTERTAINER 15c

326 Jokes and Riddles, 25 Magic Tricks, 10 Parlor Games, 13 Toasts, 13 Fairy Tales, 105 Money-making Secrets, 25 Monologues, 21 Puzzles and Problems, 5 Comic Recitations, 10 Funny Readings, 11 Parlor Pastimes, 13 Flirtations, 1110 Girls' and Boys' Names and their Meanings, 10 Picture Puzzles, 69 Amusing Rhymes, 37 Amusing Experiments, Deaf and Dumb Alphabet, Shadowgraphy, Gypsy Fortune Teller, How to tell Fortunes with Cards, Dice, Dominoes, Crystal, Coffee Cup, etc. Hypnotism, Ventriloquism, Cut-outs for Checkers and Chess, Dominoes, Fox and Geese, 9 Men Morris, Spanish Prison Puzzle, Game of Anagrams, 25 Card Tricks, Crystal Gazing, etc. **ALL FOR 15c.** *Novelty Catalog 10c*

TELL YOUR OWN FORTUNE

With the aid of this dream book and fortune-teller. The key to your future. Will you be lucky in love? Successful in business? Will you be wealthy? Complete with dictionary of dreams with descriptions and explanations, with lucky numbers, fortunate days, oracles, divinations, palmistry, etc. **Price 10c** postpaid.

Learn to Hypnotize

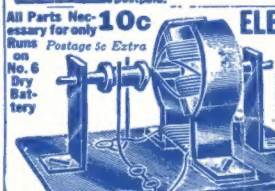
This book tells how. Explains all about Hypnotism, how to hypnotize, how to produce sleep, how to awaken a subject. Medical hypnotism, hypnotism of diseases, how to hypnotize animals, illusions etc. 27 chapters. **ONLY 10c ppd.**

All Parts Necessary for only 10c

Runs on No. 6 Dry Battery

Postage 5c Extra

ELECTRIC MOTOR



An Electric Motor for only 10 cents. Sounds almost unbelievable but it is perfectly true. For ONLY 10 cents we send you all the parts necessary packed in a neat box with full printed and illustrated directions for assembling. No trouble at all putting the parts together. In fact it's fun.

HOME BREWED WINES BEERS

This book contains over 100 simple recipes with full instructions, for making all kinds of wines, beers, cider, cider champagne, brandies, gin, rum, whisker, fruit cordials and simple liqueurs, fruit syrups, various kinds of vinegars, etc., etc. Home made wines and beers are particularly good and wholesome and their manufacture is not difficult. **PRICE 10c ppd.**

Merry Widow Handkerchief

A perfect model of the most necessary lingerie garment worn by the ladies, which when folded up and worn in the pocket, has the appearance of being a handkerchief. A very clever and mirth ful joker. **PRICE 10c ppd.**

Johnson Smith & Co. Dep. 791, Racine, Wis.

ADDRESS ORDERS FOR GOODS ON THIS PAGE TO

JOHNSON SMITH & CO.

DEPT. 791, RACINE, WISCONSIN

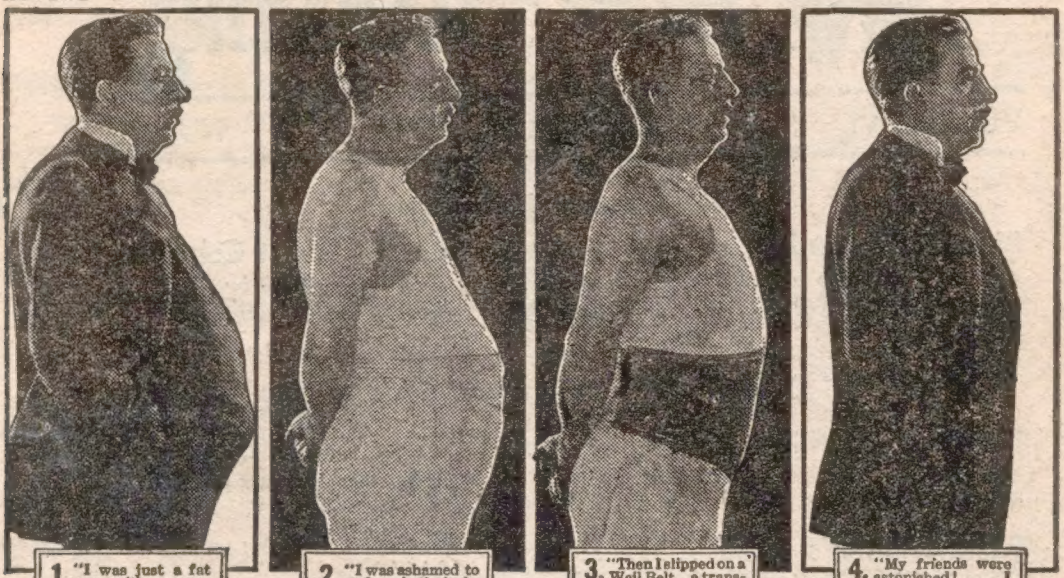
Our complete Catalog sent on receipt of 10c, or the De Luxe Cloth Bound Edition for 25c. Bigger and better than ever. Only book of its kind in existence. Describes thousands of all the latest tricks in magic, the newest novelties, puzzles, games, sporting goods, rubber stamps, unusual and interesting books, curiosities in seeds and plants, etc., many unprocurable elsewhere. Remit by Coin, Money Order or Postage Stamps.

FROM A FAT MAN... to a HE-MAN... *in 10 MINUTES!*

"I REDUCED MY WAIST 8 INCHES" WRITES GEORGE BAILEY

"I lost 50 pounds" says W. T. Anderson. "My waist is 8 inches smaller" writes W. L. McGinnis. "Felt like a new man" claims Fred Wolf. "Wouldn't sell my belt for $100" writes C. W. Higbee.

ACTUAL PHOTOGRAPHS SHOWING THE IMMEDIATE IMPROVEMENT IN APPEARANCE



1. "I was just a fat man with a protruding stomach... ill at ease and clumsy—no pep to do anything!"

2. "I was ashamed to undress in the locker room—my friends poked fun at me and I had no answer!"

3. "Then I slipped on a Weil Belt...a transformation took place... what a difference — pounds seemed to have fallen away!"

4. "My friends were astonished!... I looked better — my clothes fitted me—and I felt like a million dollars!"

We are so sure that you will reduce your waistline at least *three* inches that we want you to . .

TRY THE WEIL BELT FOR 10 DAYS AT OUR EXPENSE!

We GUARANTEE to REDUCE your WAIST THREE INCHES IN TEN DAYS . . .

. . . . or it won't cost you one cent . . . . even the postage will be refunded!

YES SIR: I too, promised myself that I would exercise but it was too much like work—and it's darn hard to diet when you like to eat. The Weil Belt was just the answer—no diets, no drugs—I feel like a new man and I lost 8 inches of fat in less than 6 months!

GREATLY IMPROVES YOUR APPEARANCE!

The Weil Reducing Belt will make you appear many inches slimmer at once, and in 10 short days your waistline will actually be 3 inches smaller—three inches of fat gone—or it won't cost you one cent!

It supports the sagging muscles of the abdomen and quickly gives an erect, athletic carriage.

Don't be embarrassed any longer with that "corporation" for in a short time, only the admiring comments of your friends will remind you that you once had a bulging waistline.

THE MASSAGE-LIKE ACTION DOES IT!

You will be completely comfortable and entirely unaware that its constant gentle pressure is working constantly while you walk, work or sit . . . its massage-like action gently but persistently eliminating fat with every move you make.

Many enthusiastic wearers write that it not only reduces fat but it also supports the abdominal walls and keeps the digestive organs in place—that they are no longer fatigued—and that it gently increases their endurance and vigor!

DON'T WAIT—FAT IS DANGEROUS!

Fat is not only unbecoming, but it also endangers your health. Insurance companies know the danger of fat accumulations. The best medical authorities warn against obesity, so don't wait any longer.

Send for our 10 day free trial offer. We repeat—either you take off 3 inches of fat in ten days, or it won't cost you one penny! Even the postage you pay to return the package will be refunded!

SEND FOR 10 DAY FREE TRIAL OFFER

THE WEIL COMPANY, INC.
109 HILL STREET, NEW HAVEN, CONN.

Gentlemen: Send me FREE, your illustrated folder describing The Weil Belt and full details of your 10 day FREE trial offer.

*Name*_____

*Address*_____

Use coupon or write your name and address on a penny post card.

10¢ DIME WESTERN MAGAZINE

VOLUME VI SEPTEMBER 1st, 1934 NUMBER 2

One Complete Western Novel

Rimrock Renegades ..... By Walt Coburn 12

Without feed for its cattle or pay for its men, bullied, persecuted, victimized by powerful neighbors, it looked like the T Down spread was headed for red ruin—that it would drag the Tarbells, father and son, over the rim with it.

Three Complete Western Novelettes

Guns for a Yearling ..... By Harry F. Olmsted 54

Pete Demoree, jailed years before for a crime he never committed, finds queer peace in the grimming, fighting courage of a youngster he should have hated!

Bounty-Hunter's Breed ..... By Ray Nafziger 76

Rimrock Britton's ironbound law-creed was shattered when the youth who bore his own name rode off on a lawless trail, gunning his own brand of justice.

Killers—Back to Back ..... By Cliff Farrell 104

Old blood scores must sometimes wait when an outside lobo threat makes common call on gunman's courage.

Western Short Stories

Tensleep—Calamity Howler By Bart Cassidy 43

Even a bounty-hunting marshal may forget the price on a horsethief's head.

Long-Range Posse ..... By Stewart Van der Veer 95

A long-barrelled gun and a short-handed posse make a fine combine—sometimes.

—And—

Vanishing Breed ..... Trail Rider 10

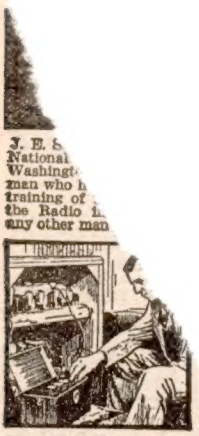
A pioneer won . . . or he died.

In the Saddle ..... A Department 122

Cover Painting by Walter M. Baumhofer

Story Illustrations by Don Hewitt and George H. Wert

Published twice every month by Popular Publications, Inc., 2256 Grove Street, Chicago, Illinois. Editorial and executive offices 205 East Forty-second Street, New York City. Harry Steeger, President and Secretary. Harold S. Goldsmith, Vice President and Treasurer. Entered as second-class matter October 26, 1932, at the post office at Chicago, Ill., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Title registration pending at U. S. Patent Office. Copyright 1934 by Popular Publications, Inc. Single copy price 10c. Yearly subscriptions in U. S. A. $1.00. For advertising rates address Sam J. Perry, 205 E. 42nd St., New York, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts, kindly enclose stamped, self-addressed envelopes for their return if found unavailable. The publishers cannot accept responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts, although care will be exercised in handling them. Printed in U. S. A.



SET SERVICING has paid many N.R.I. men $5, $10, $15 a week extra for their spare time. Full time men make as much as $40, $60, $75 a week.

If we told you return of this coupon would

GUARANTEE YOU $50 A WEEK,

INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOLS

"The Universal University" Box 3308, Scranton, Penna.

Without cost or obligation, please send me a copy of your booklet, "Who Wins and Why," and full particulars about the subject before which I have marked X:

TECHNICAL AND INDUSTRIAL COURSES

☐ Architect	☐ Automobile Mechanic
☐ Architectural Draftsman	☐ Plumbing ☐ Heating
☐ Building Estimating	☐ Air Conditioning
☐ Wood Millworking	☐ Sheet Metal Worker
☐ Contractor and Builder	☐ Steam Engineer
☐ Structural Draftsman	☐ Steam Electric Engineer
☐ Structural Engineer	☐ Civil Engineer
☐ Electrical Engineer	☐ Surveying and Mapping
☐ Electric Lighting	☐ Refrigeration
☐ Welding, Electric and Gas	☐ R. R. Locomotives ☐ Air Brakes
☐ Reading Shop Blueprints	☐ R. R. Section Foreman
☐ Telegraph Engineer	☐ R. R. Bridge and Building Foreman
☐ Telephone Work	☐ R. R. Signalman
☐ Mechanical Engineer	☐ Highway Engineering
☐ Mechanical Draftsman	☐ Chemistry ☐ Pharmacy
☐ Machinist ☐ Toolmaker	☐ Coal Mining Engineer
☐ Inventing and Patenting	☐ Navigation ☐ Boilermaker
☐ Patternmaker	☐ Textile Overseer or Supt.
☐ Heat Treatment of Metals	☐ Cotton Manufacturing
☐ Bridge Engineer	☐ Woolen Manufacturing
☐ Bridge and Building Foreman	☐ Agriculture ☐ Fruit Growing
☐ Gas Engines ☐ Diesel Engines	☐ Poultry Farming ☐ Radio
☐ Aviation Engines	☐ Marine Engineer

BUSINESS TRAINING COURSES

☐ Business Management	☐ Business Correspondence
☐ Office Management	☐ Lettering Show Cards ☐ Signs
☐ Industrial Management	☐ Stenography and Typing
☐ Traffic Management	☐ Civil Service
☐ Accountancy and C.P.A. Coaching	☐ Mail Carrier
	☐ Railway Mail Clerk
☐ Bookkeeping	☐ Grade School Subjects
☐ Secretarial Work	☐ High School Subjects
☐ Cost Accountant	☐ College Preparatory
☐ Salesmanship ☐ Advertising	☐ First Year College
☐ Service Station Salesmanship	☐ Illustrating ☐ Spanish
☐ Wallpaper Decorating Salesmanship	☐ Cartooning ☐ French
	☐ Lumber Dealer

Name..... Age.....

Address.....

City..... State.....

Occupation.....

If you reside in Canada, send this coupon to the International Correspondence Schools Canadian, Limited, Montreal, Canada

WOULD YOU MARK AND MAIL IT?

But we don't tell you that! It's not true. Too much depends on you

WE DO say this — and can prove it: Thousands of men all over the country today are making $50 a week and over, and are emphatic in the conviction home-study training through I. C. S. Courses is the greatest single factor in shaping their careers! If you have just a vague wish for more money, don't trouble yourself or us with the coupon. But if you mean business, so do we!

X EVERY TIME YOU SEE A COUPON LIKE THIS, OPPORTUNITY IS KNOCKING AT YOUR DOOR

NEW LOW PRICES

GOODRICH Firestone GOODYEAR U.S. FISK and OTHERS

$2.15 29x4.40-21

SAVE ON YOUR TIRES WE WANT DEALERS

YOU CAN'T BEAT OUR PRICES

And we defy anyone to excel our quality. Every standard brand tire reconstructed by our superior, modern method is positively guaranteed to give full 12 months' service under severest road conditions. This guarantee is backed by the entire financial resources of an old reliable company.

TODAY'S LOWEST PRICES

BALLOON TIRES

Size	Rim	Tires	Tubes
29x4.40-21		$2.15	$0.85
29x4.50-20		2.35	.85
30x4.50-21		2.40	.85
28x4.75-19		2.45	.95
29x4.75-20		2.50	.95
29x5.00-19		2.85	1.05
30x5.00-20		2.85	1.05
28x5.25-18		2.90	1.15
29x5.25-19		2.95	1.15
30x5.25-20		2.95	1.15
31x5.25-21		3.25	1.15
28x5.50-18		3.35	1.15
29x5.50-19		3.35	1.15
30x6.00-18		3.40	1.15
31x6.00-19		3.40	1.15
32x6.00-20		3.45	1.25
33x6.00-21		3.65	1.25
32x6.50-20		3.75	1.35

REGULAR CORD TIRES

Size	Tires	Tubes
30x3½	$2.35	.75
31x4	2.95	.85
32x4	2.95	.85
33x4	2.95	.85
34x4	3.25	.85
32x4½	3.35	1.15
33x4½	3.45	1.15
34x4½	3.45	1.15
30x5	3.65	1.35
33x5	3.75	1.45
35x5	3.95	1.65

HEAVY DUTY TRUCK TIRES

Size	Tires	Tubes
32x6	$7.95	$2.75
34x7	10.95	3.95
36x8	9.95	3.95
36x8	12.45	4.25
40x8	15.95	4.95

TRUCK BALLOONS

Size	Tires	Tubes
6.00-20	$3.75	$1.65
7.00-20	5.95	2.95
7.50-20	6.95	3.75
8.25-20	11.45	4.95

ALL OTHER TRUCK SIZES

ALL TUBES ARE GUARANTEED BRAND NEW

SEND ONLY $1 DEPOSIT on each tire. (On each Truck Tire send a $4 deposit.) We ship balance C. O. D., 5 per cent discount for full cash with order. *Any tire failing to give 12 months' service replaced at half price.*

12 MONTHS WRITTEN BOND GIVEN WITH EVERY TIRE

GOODWIN TIRE & RUBBER COMPANY Dept. 589
1240 S. MICHIGAN AVE. CHICAGO, ILL

FREE BRAND NEW TUBE OR "RAY-O-VAC" LANTERN WITH EACH ORDER FOR 2 TIRES

Western Stories Written by Men Who Know and Love the West!

★ STAR ★
WESTERN
MAGAZINE

One gripping novel by
Max Brand—

GUNLESS GUNMAN

A glamorous saga of a strange Borderland quest; of a man who walked alone into hell, unarmed except for his courage and his two fists—with his back-trail haunted by hidden gunmen!

4 Great Western Novelettes by 4 Favorite Western Writers

Strength of the Desert Breed
by Ray Nafziger

Herding Through Hell
by Arthur Hawthorne Carhart

Lobo Heritage
by Art Lawson

Murder Mesa
by William F. Bragg

—Also—

Memorable Short Stories, by
Walt Coburn and *Robert E. Mahaffay*

Plus Other Star Features and Departments

All in the Great September Issue

On Your Newsstand Now!
Buy It Today!

PILES DON'T BE CUT Until You Try This Wonderful Treatment

for pile suffering. If you have piles in any form write for a FREE sample of Page's Pile Tablets and you will bless the day that you read this. Write today. E. R. Page Co., 2346-D Page Bldg., Marshall, Mich.

INVENTORS

Time counts in applying for patents. Don't risk delay in protecting your ideas. Write for FREE book, "How to Obtain a Patent" and "Record of Invention" form. No charge for information on how to proceed. Communications strictly confidential. Prompt, careful, efficient service. My success built upon strength of satisfactory service to inventors located in every State in the Union.
Clarence A. O'Brien, 46-G, Adams Bldg., Washington, D. C.

Put Layers of SOLID MUSCLE on EVERY INCH of YOUR BODY!

Amazing New

Home Training Camp

Gets Remarkable Results

New kind of home gymnasium quickly builds smashing muscles and tremendous all-around bodily strength. Rebuilds every muscle. Gives you new stamina, endurance, and never-failing energy. Read the 23 big features you get—more than ever before offered at this price by anyone, anywhere, at any time!

QUICK!

Do you want a body like this? Read here how easily you can get this kind of body.

LOOK AT ALL YOU GET . . . 23 BIG FEATURES—

1—**Chest Expander**—Ten Cables, 200lbs. resistance. Adjustable to your particular needs. A quick way to build the kind of chest you have always longed to have.

2—**Adjustable Headgear**—for building sturdy, powerful neck muscles.

3—**Foot Gear**—for ankles and calves.

4—**New Type Hand Grips**—Strengthen fingers, put new force into wrists, forearms.

5—**Patented Stirrup**—Puts new power into legs, muscles of stomach and thighs.

6—**Rowing Machine Attachment**—gives you the back-building advantage of this great sport.

7—**Complete Wall Exerciser, Attachments**—for general body development.

8—**Muscle Clock**—Measures your muscle power. Shows what your muscle power is in pounds.

9—**Foot-Gear and Ankle Strengthener**—to put new endurance into your ankles and to lift and strengthen your arches.

10—**Special Skip Rope**—for increasing speed and developing your wind.

11—**20 Famous Wrestling Holds**—clearly pictured and described.

12—**15 Secrets of Jiu Jitsu**—making you the master of any man, regardless of his size.

13—**17 Winning Boxing Positions**—clearly shown in pictures.

14—**10 Feats of Strength**—tricks you can easily do which will amaze everyone.

15—**Tricks of Hand Balancing**—some of the stunts which have astounded you on the stage.

16—**Vital Food Facts**—scientific information told in a simple way. What to eat to create new power and vitality.

17—**Special Ways to Get Bulging Biceps**—clear instruction for using this apparatus to rebuild that specific part.

18—**Secrets of Chest Expansion.**

19—**The Stomach Muscles and How! to Strengthen Them**—special advice on this important zone of the body.

20—**Ways to Put New Power into Your Legs and Thighs**—many otherwise strong men are weak here.

21—**Hints on Increasing the Strength of Your Back**—for greater lifting ability.

22—**PRIVATE Letter To Men**—pointing dangers and safeguards you should know, for your own protection.

23—**Complete 150-Page Sex Book**—simply and clearly written (and illustrated) by great doctor. Straight answers to questions that have puzzled you.

For Only $3.95

150-PAGE SEX BOOK GIVEN FREE OF EXTRA CHARGE For Prompt Actio

SEND NO MONEY

Mail Coupon NOW!

You don't have to send a penny with this coupon. When this big package is delivered—in its Plain Container—merely deposit the special price of $3.95 plus actual delivery charges. (This one low price includes ALL these 23 items—no further payments.)

Then if, after 5 days examination, you are convinced that this complete home gymnasium will not give you the kind of body you have always longed to have, will not improve your health, increase your strength, and make you a better and more confident specimen of physical manhood—if you are not positive that these claims are true, then you have the perfect right to send back all the material you have received and your $3.95 will be refunded in full at once.

Don't be satisfied with anything less than the kind of body you have always wanted! Don't "put off" doing something about it—now when it is so easy to rebuild yourself this new way! Mail coupon—without money—at once THE HOME GYM CO., Dept. 159, 131 E. 23rd St., New York, N. Y.

THE HOME GYM CO., Dept. 159
131 East 23rd Street, New York, N. Y.

Send me at once—in a plain, unmarked container—complete home gymnasium, including all features listed on this page. When package is delivered I will deposit $3.95, plus actual delivery charges.

If after 5 days examination, I am not delighted with this complete outfit, I may return it and you will at once refund my $3.95 in full.

SPECIAL: If you act at once you will also receive this 150-page sex book ABSOLUTELY FREE!

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____

☐ Check here if you are enclosing $3.95 right WITH this coupon. In that case, we will pay the delivery charges and you will make this saving.

"DAMN TOFF JEEGER!"

SIX STICKS OF DYNAMITE lift the Mexican jail off Steve Kane and he and his partner, Omaha Oglesby, ride back across the Border to the L4L—to find the owner dead with a bullet above his heart—old Barney Macrea, the best boss they ever had.

"Done shot himself when we found he robbed the gold express," explained the sheriff.

"You lie," said Steve Kane.

"And I'm buyin' the ranch from his daughter at my own price," put in narrow-eyed Joe East of the Quarter Circle JHL. "You lie," said Steve Kane, and since it was the West he and Omaha went to work to make good his words with fists and guns and wily cowboy brains. "What a nice man," said Barney's daughter Mary. "I don' know about nice man," replied the wise old Mexican cook, "but he is damn toff jeeger, which is worth twenty nice man." In the nights and days of hard riding and swift shooting that followed Steve's enemies had plenty reason to agree with the cook, and so will you when you meet him in

BORDER MAN

A Complete Novel by W. C. TUTTLE

in the September 15th issue of ADVENTURE—out September 1st. It brings you also a complete novelette of the War—NIGHT PATROL—by Theodore Fredenburgh, in which Sergeant Investigator Bill Bailey goes up to the Front to find out why, in the Yanks' most strongly fortified town, each dawn finds guards and runners lying in the streets with their throats cut and their heads bashed in. You will be thrilled, too, by RESCUE, Jacland Marmur's story of a night of flaming courage at sea, by the second installment of Ared White's SECRET AGENT B-7, in which the net begins to close around America's ace spy in Berlin, and by other stories by the writers who make all lovers of thrilling and authentic fiction turn first to

NOW TWICE A MONTH

Adventure 15c

You can get the Sept. 15th issue at any newsstand on Sept. 1st.

"Stop Worrying . . .

NOW I CAN TELL YOU THE TRUE FACTS ABOUT SEX!

WOULD YOU like to know the *whole truth* about sex? All of the startling facts that even the frankest books have heretofore not dared to print are explained in clear, scientific manner, vividly illustrated, in the revolutionary book — "The New Eugenics". Here at last, the naked truth stands forth, stripped of all prudery and narrow prejudice. Old fashioned taboos are discarded and the subject of sex is brought out into the bright light of medical science by Dr. C. S. Whitehead M. D. and Dr. Charles A. Hoff, M. D., the authors!

SEX ATTRACTION!

Sex appeal and sex satisfaction are the *most powerful forces* in your life. To remain in ignorance is to remain in danger of lifelong suffering. It is the purpose of this great book to show sex-ignorant men and women how to enjoy safely the thrilling experiences that are their birthright. It not only tells you how to *attract the opposite sex*, but also how to *hold the love of your mate* throughout a *blissful married life.*

DANGEROUS!

. . . Unless you know the true facts about sex! Ignorance leads to shame, despair, worry and remorse.

Do you know how to add variety to your love-making? The most innocent kiss may lead to tragedy if you are ignorant of sex relations.

WILL FEAR

grip you on your wedding night? . . . or will it be the tender, thrilling experience that is your birthright!

Banish Fear and Sex Ignorance Forever!

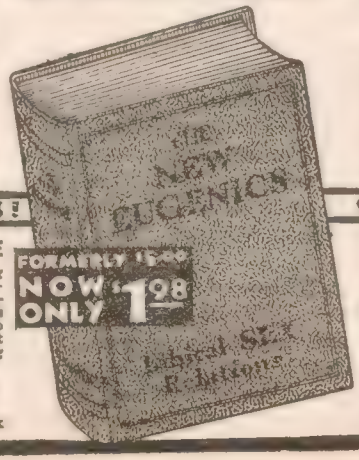
SEX IS NO LONGER a mysterious sin, mentioned only in the conversational gutters—it is the most powerful force in the world and can be made the most beautiful. Thanks to this bravely written book, it is no longer necessary to pay the awful price for one moment of bliss. Science now lights the path to knowledge and lifelong sex happiness.

LOVE MAKING IS AN ART!

Are you an *awkward novice* in the art of love-making or a master of its difficult technique? The art of love-making takes *skill* and *knowledge*. The sexual embrace as practiced by those ignorant of its true scientific importance is crude, awkward and *often terrifying* to more sensitive natures. Normal sex-suited people are torn apart because they lack the knowledge that makes for a happy sex life!

Sex Facts for Men and Women

Twilight Sleep—Easy Childbirth
Sex Excesses
The Crime of Abortion
Impotence and Sex Weakness
Secrets of the Honeymoon
Teaching Children Sex
The Dangers of Petting
What Every Man Should Know
The Truth about Masturbation
Venereal Diseases
The Sexual Embrace
How to Build Virility
How to Gain Greater Delight
What to Allow a Lover To Do
Birth Control Chart for Married Women

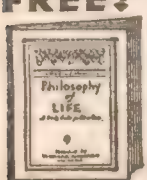


SEND NO MONEY!

You send no money — just fill out the coupon below and then when it arrives, in plain wrapper, pay the postman $1.98. Keep the book five days, then if you are not satisfied send it back and we will refund your money immediately and without question. This book NOT sold to minors.

640 DARING PAGES! | **98 VIVID PICTURES!**

FREE! PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE



This astonishing book, telling frankly and clearly the difference in construction and function of man and woman, is sent without cost to all who order "The New Eugenics" at $1.98. All about the thrilling mystery of Sex! FREE!

PIONEER PUBLISHING CO.
Radio City
1270 Sixth Avenue, New York

PIONEER PUBLISHING COMPANY,
Dept. PD9, 1270 Sixth Ave., New York, N. Y.

Send me the "The New Eugenics" in plain wrapper. I will pay postman $1.98 (plus postage) on delivery. If I am not completely satisfied, I can return the book within five days and the entire price will be refunded immediately. Also send me, FREE of CHARGE, your book "The Philosophy of Life".

*Name*_____

*Address*_____ *Age*____

Foreign Orders 10 Shillings in Advance

VANISHING BREED

LIFE was no rose bed in the towering Blues, when Tug and Martha Saunders settled there. But in deep holes of the icy stream lurked ravenous trout. Deer, turkey, grouse and squirrel were plentiful, while tall pines promised fuel and building material and in the bottomlands lush grama brushed the stirrups. Life was good, and Tug whistled as he started building their home.

And in just that fashion he whistled away the years, come good fortune or bad. Sons came to bless that wide-porched log home. Longhorns, driven from Sonora, increased mightily. Tug prospered despite varmints, Apaches and rustlers. The T Bar S became hospitality itself, Tug and Martha reigning simply and generously. Prosperity couldn't taint these Frontier folk.

Passing years fetched gray hairs to Tug and Martha and brought manhood to their sons. The T Bar S was known as a top outfit, its owners as pure cowfolks. Then into this peace intruded a rustler challenge. A rustler that took his toll, left his sign and dared Tug to take it up. Not an Injun or a Mex, or even a bad white, following dim trails by choice. It was Clubfoot, the stock-killer, a huge, trap-marked grizzly.

Tug's answer was bait and traps. But Clubfoot, wise with years and bitter memories, lived fat . . . for a year, then wildling gods forgot him. Tug and his eldest boy found where Clubfoot had sprung a trap, fought it ragefully, then shuffled away, pulling along with him a five-hundred-pound drag.

"Son," Tug's blood pulsed, "fetch the wagon an' some planks. I'll salt Clubfoot an' we'll take down the Association reward."

That's howcome Tug took the trail, alone. The tracks were plain, leading up the wash a mile to a rocky gateway between the end of a cliff and a huge weathered monolith. Beyond this gateway the slope pitched sharply up.

Scenting a kill, Tug tied his terrified pony, entered the gateway, his eyes on the sign. Unthinking and foolhardy maybe, but courageous. Just around that point of rocks, Clubfoot lay low, his pig eyes haunting the backtrail.

As Tug came in sight, the brute hurtled at him with gnashing roars. Too late Tug jerked up his rifle and fired. He heard the slug strike, then Clubfoot was on him, clubbing, fanging, spewing roars. Mauled cruelly, Tug somehow flashed his Texas Bowie knife, plunged it into that ravening death, until his arm grew numb, until his senses flickered into oblivion.

Tug's crazed pony, stampeding past their wagon, alarmed the boys. They whipped up the wagon ponies, followed the trail to its bloody finish. Clubfoot lay dead, his loose forepaw draped across Tug's torn and gory form.

They killed horses getting him to town. Tug's concussion, internal injuries, a dozen fractures, pain—they were but added scars of Frontier existence. A pioneer won . . . or he died.

What matter Tug never walked erect again? What matter the limp? He had Martha and the boys, and the stock-killer was dead. Life was still good and Tug's whistle soon echoed again. But trouble dogged him.

Range conditions were changing, bringing barb wire, Forest Service grass toll, dry farmers, low stock prices. Tug borrowed, as always, on his note. Then came drouth and falling markets. Money due, and no way of paying. . . .

When the bank moved in, Tug and Martha and the boys moved away from the T Bar S and its memories. The boys, top-hands all, made their way. But Tug, old, stiff with life's scars, wasn't wanted. . . .

Tug still whistles as he cuts a jag of wood now and then. Martha works in the town store, as gracious as when she queened the T Bar S. Neither have regrets. Life is too full, too busy. There are grandchildren now, and somehow, if they need a helping hand, they always turn to Tug and Martha Saunders—vanishing breed of the iron frontiers!

—TRAIL RIDER.

STARTING WITH THIS ISSUE—

10c DIME WESTERN MAGAZINE

WILL BE ISSUED TWICE EACH MONTH!

Thousands Have Asked Us to Make This Change. . . .
Now, After Months of Preparation, We're Ready to Go!

The Same High-Powered Brand of Flesh-and-Blood Western Fiction! Written by the Same World-Famous Authors!

TWO WEEKS FROM TODAY

—in the September 15th Issue—

YOU'LL FIND THIS ALL-STAR LINE-UP:

BORDER BLOOD

A Smashing, Full Length Novel of Border Outlawry
By T. T. FLYNN

Plus 4 Novelettes—By 4 Top-Hand Authors

Walt Coburn — **Ray Nafziger**
Harry F. Olmsted — **Robert E. Mahaffay**

Plus Other Stories and Features

—Including a Tensleep Maxon Story—
By BART CASSIDY

Ask Your Newsdealer Today to Save You a Copy!

The September 15th Dime Western—Out August 31st!

by WALT COBURN
(Author of "Men of the Dark Trails," etc.)

RIMROCK

With Old Man Tarbell made into a wheel-chair cripple by bushwhacking guns, his once-mighty T Down spread had reached the ragged edge of red ruin and was slipping over the rim. Without feed for their cattle or pay for their men, bullied, persecuted, victimized by their powerful neighbors, the Quinlans, it looked like the Tarbells, father and son, would soon pass into rangeland history!

IT WAS not yet daylight when Tom Tarbell shoved his head into the bunkhouse door.

"Roll out, boys!" he shouted. "Prairie fire!"

Snores ceased. The sleeping cowboys threw aside blankets and tarps and reached for their overalls and boots. Somebody lit the lantern. They dressed as fast as men can dress, these T Down cowboys

RENEGADES

A Smashing Novel of War On the Range

who worked for Old Man Tarbell and his son Tom.

A big fire this late in August meant robbing the cattle of their winter feed. God knows the conditions were bad enough. A dry summer, cowboys pulling thirst crazed cattle out of bog holes. No rain . . . and one cloudless, dry, parching day after another. They had kept the cattle off the winter range as much as possible, saving what feed there was for the dreaded winter. Now . . . prairie fire. . . .

"How do you reckon it started?" grunted a cowboy, struggling with a tight boot. He was a new man with the outfit.

Nobody answered his question. The older cowboys were exchanging meaning looks.

Grizzled old Buck Beeler, foreman of the T Down, was the first man dressed despite his sixty years. He reached under his pillow and pulled out a filled cartridge belt and holstered six-shooter which he buckled on. The other cowboys shoved guns into the waistbands of their overalls.

Old Buck's move had been significant. The new man asked no more questions.

From the rear of the bunk-house came the sound of snoring.

"Somebody wake the Swede," said the grizzled Buck. "He'd sleep through anything. Kick him awake. There's work to do. Rattle your hocks, boys."

Towards the east the red glow of the fire showed against the graying sky.

At the barn Tom Tarbell, tall, bronzed, unsmiling, met the old foreman. "Looks bad, Buck. Wind's in this direction."

"And it's a big 'un, Tom. Looky yonder . . . and yonder. Three different fires. They was set a-purpose."

"I've expected it."

The cowboys came on the run from the bunk-house. Tom gave quick, level headed orders.

"Four of you boys saddle up and wrangle the horse pasture. Ride like hell. Fetch in what you can. We'll need two four-horse teams and the saddle horses. Hop to it. You other boys load water barrels in the mess wagon and bed wagon and fill 'em at the well. Cover the barrels with canvas. Throw in all the gunnysacks and old blankets and canvas you can find. You can drag the wagons up to the well with your saddle horses." Hardly stopping for breath he went on:

"Every man that owns a gun, pack it. Those that don't own a gun, get one at the office. The bookkeeper will fix you up. Don't waste any time, men. Every minute counts. Where's Swede?"

A giant of a man with touseled yellow hair pushed through the crowd, wiping sleep from his blue eyes.

"I'm here, Tom."

"Look after filling the barrels. Load in shovels and axes. You know where everything is. And get some butcher knives from the cook."

Swede Olson nodded. Swede was worth ten men in a moment of confusion. Nothing excited him. He was the farmer at the ranch: had been in charge of the big truck garden and the farming machinery at the T Down for ten years or more.

"The Old Man wants to see you, Buck," said Tom.

"He knows about the fire?"

"It was him that sighted it. His pain had got him awake and he was sitting up in bed to ease his back when he sighted the glow yonder and called me."

"It's hell on him, laid up and helpless. Tom, if that wind picks up, our winter range is plumb gone. It'll bust the T Down. Bad enough as things was."

Tom Tarbell nodded. "He lets on like he ain't worried. Just like he let on he wasn't sufferin' when you found him early last spring layin' in a coulee, shot in the back. I'd hoped, Buck, to clear enough this fall to send him back to the Mayos or to Johns Hopkins. They might be able to fix him up. But now I don't know. . . . Go see him, Buck, while I help the outfit here get goin'. And listen, Buck, I'll ramrod the fire fightin' while you stay here with the Old Man. I'm scared to leave him alone. Those bushwhackin' cowards might come here, knowin' all the cowboys are fightin' fire. That Quinlan outfit is a mixture of snake and coyote and a little cougar. And every man workin' for the Q outfit is a tough hand. Ride herd on the Old Man, will you, Buck?"

"Just as you say, Tom. And I reckon you got the right idee. You got a long head on you, son, even if they did give you book learnin' at college."

Tom managed a grin. Old Buck grinned back. Tom's eyes, dark gray flecked with brown, looked into the puckered sky-blue eyes of the bow-legged little old foreman. They understood one another. And they both loved that crippled man over in the log house, the cowman they affectionately called the Old Man.

"I'll look after him, Tom. You handle the fire fightin'. Take Swede along. When it comes to wettin' sacks and doin' sweatin' work he can't be beat. Tom, take care of yourself. Me and the Old Man needs you a heap."

TWO four-horse teams dragging wagons loaded with barrels of water, wet sacks and blankets, shovels and axes—two four-horse teams traveling at a long trot across the rolling Montana prairie. A score of armed cowboys following Tom Tarbell as he rode, standing in his stirrups, towards that crimson skyline.

Tom's jaws were clamped tight. He was thinking of his father back at the ranch. The Old Man who had come up the trail from Texas with one of the early trail herds to locate in Montana. Old Man Jackson Tarbell had fought for everything he owned. He had crossed the plains when the Indians were on the warpath. He had placer-mined at Last Chance Gulch and Virginia City. He had picked out a piece of land in a fertile valley and had settled there. From that small ranch had grown the T Down outfit that was now one of the big spreads of Montana. Enduring all manner of hardships, Jackson Tarbell had survived. He had married a Helena girl and Tom was born there at the ranch. Then, when Tom was a small boy, his mother had died. She was buried at the ranch.

The Old Man had given Tom the best that money could buy in education. He had been proud of Tom and wanted the boy to have all those advantages that had not been allowed his pioneer father. At times Jackson Tarbell seemed too stern, too exacting in his discipline of his son. But Tom needed holding down. There was pulsing red blood in his veins. The Old Man ruled him with a stern hand. Yet there were many times when the two would sit together at the ranch or by a campfire and the Old Man would soften. These mellow moods endeared the father to the son.

Tom would sit and listen to tales of the old cattle trails, of Indian fights, of humorous anecdotes. The Old Gent liked to tell stories on Buck Beeler who had come up the trail with him. Buck, who had a liking for cards and the squeak of a dance hall fiddle and a bottle. When the two got started telling on one another it was as good as any show.

Then came the first sheep into that virgin cattle country. The Quinlan outfit had taken up some land and had put in sheep along with cattle.

There were three of the Quinlans. They ran cattle on one part of their range, sheep on the other end that bordered on the T Down range. And from the time they threw in three big wether bands along the boundary line on Second Creek, trouble began. Through the past five years the two outfits had locked horns. There had been fist fights in town, one or two minor shooting scrapes. Tom, on his summer vacations from Stanford, had taken his part in these quarrels.

Then, early last spring a telegram from Buck took Tom out of his last year of college. The wire said that the Old Man had been hurt: someone had shot him from ambush, pouring buckshot into his back in the moonlight.

SO Tom Tarbell had come back to fight. He was leading the T Down cowboys now towards that prairie fire that someone had set. He might be leading them into the climax of this range war.

The wind carried the heat of the fire to them as they pushed hard for the crimson, smoke-hazed horizon. Heat increased. Cowboys pulled their hats down lower. They were getting nearer. Coyotes, jack rabbits, a gray wolf, scurrying before the creeping fire. Horses and cattle drifting.

A bunch of antelope. Smoke, pulled by the wind, stung the eyes of the riders.

Tom paired off his men. "Kill a steer and skin the hide off, then drag it with your ropes whenever you can get near enough to the fire. You got butcher knives. String out along the line of fire. Keep out of the coulees. Stick to the ridges. Those coulees are choked with brush and you wouldn't have a chance fightin' fire there. Don't separate too far, boys. Fight the fire from behind. The wagons will be here in an hour or so. Don't get yourselves or your horses trapped by the fire. What I aim to do is check it there at alkalai Flat. Whip it out at the north end of where we see the blaze. The south end will burn itself out when it hits the flat. Nothing to burn there but white dirt. And keep a watch out for strangers. Somebody started this fire and they might still be near here. All right, cowboys. Drop those steers and use the hides as a drag."

There sounded the crack of guns. Cowboys jumped to work with skinning knife and jackknife ripping off the hides. They worked like mad, sweating, silent for the most part. Then, dragging the hides with their ropes, they rode on into the danger zone, into the desperate fight to save the T Down winter range, two men to each green hide.

CHAPTER TWO

The Tally Book Clue

HEAT and smoke were torturing to men and horses. Not a man of them but knew how to fight prairie fire. Then the Swede got there with his wagons. One of the barrels held drinking water. The other barrels were used to dip sacks in.

Help was coming from other directions. Obeying the unwritten law of the range, neighboring ranchers were coming with crews of men. Some nesters showed up and went to work. They were whipping the fire out with better success than Tom Tarbell had hoped for. A few hours and they would have it licked. Tom rode from one end of the line to the other, bossing the work. Twice he saved some too-eager fire-fighters from being trapped. Now and then he would quit his horse to whip out a blaze with his wet gunnysack. He gave advice to some of the nesters who were working too hard in the terrific heat.

"Don't play yourselves out. The water's comin' up the line, but don't drink enough to make you sick. We got a fire guard burnin' up ahead. When we hit that, we got it licked. Mighty white of you men to help. I won't forget it."

Some Indians from the reservation rode up. There must have been thirty or forty of them. Tom hailed them with a wide grin. In the Sioux language he told them where to get wet sacks. They made good fire fighters. Their wagons would go back loaded with fresh meat.

Smoke rolled against the cloudless sky, making the sun a red ball. Tom's eyes, red from smoke, narrowed as he saw about a dozen riders coming from the direction of the Quinlan range. Tom Tarbell hung his black, wet gunnysack across the horn of his saddle and wiped his hands on his sweat soaked shirt. Then he examined his gun before riding across the blackened, smoking strip to meet the riders.

Red Quinlan, oldest of the three brothers, rode in the lead. Tall, rawboned, with small, greenish eyes and a battered-looking face, he was rated as the toughest rough-and-tumble fighter in the country. One of his ears was shapeless. His nose was crooked: his eyes looked from under battered brows. His hair and stubble of whiskers were fiery red, sprinkled with gray. He loved to sing and fight.

Behind him were his brothers Mark and Frank. Mark, black-haired, gray-eyed, short and thickly built. There was a surly look to his bronzed face and few men liked him. He seldom talked much. When he did he wasted few words. Sullen, surly, yet not exactly quarrelsome unless he was crossed. He had killed a man once for calling him a sheepherder.

It cost them a lot of money to clear Mark. Mark had been drunk at the time. He always drank alone, even in a crowded saloon, and the more whiskey he drank, and he drank more than the average two men put together, the more silent he became. Mostly, men let Mark Quinlan alone, drunk or sober.

Frank was different. He liked to go to the country dances and have a good time. He was a handsome young cowboy and was aware of the fact. He had his shirts and clothes made to order and wore them with an insolent swagger that made men dislike him. He carried a book with the names of girls written in it. A well-made man, young Frank Quinlan, with thick, wavy brown hair and a pair of eyes that looked almost yellow in the sunlight. He prided himself upon his bronc-riding ability and his skill with a gun—also his way with women. He was about Tom's age.

TOM rode to meet the three Quinlans and their men. They halted.

"Sighted smoke and rode over to fight fire," said the lanky Red Quinlan.

"We have all the fire fighters we need, Red." Tom's voice was impersonal, cold.

"Just wanted to be neighborly, was all. A fire like that, with the wind in the right direction, could wipe out that winter range of yourn."

"But the wind died down when the sun came up, didn't it?"

Red Quinlan's mouth grinned faintly. "Hadn't noticed till you spoke about it. There was a stiff breeze durin' the night but it has petered out. You got off lucky."

"Mighty lucky. Whoever set the fire should have set it some hours earlier."

"Think it was set?"

"In three places," said Tom. "I found the partly burned rags soaked in kerosene. The fire setters used gunnysacks dripping with the stuff. But in two places the sacks didn't burn up entirely. The third gent dropped something, there in the dark. I found it."

"What was it?" asked Frank Quinlan, his yellow eyes reflecting the crimson blaze of the fire. His face looked tense.

"I picked up an empty whiskey bottle," Tom went on evenly, and his gaze shifted from Frank to Mark Quinlan. "An empty pint labeled 'Colonel's Monogram.' That's fifteen-year-old whiskey. Mighty expensive for a common hand to drink. Well, I'm gettin' back to the fire." He started to turn. "If the T Down needs any help from the Q outfit, I'll send you boys a specially engraved invitation. This land you're on now might be burned but it is still T Down range. Yonder side of Second Creek lies the Q sheep country."

"Sounds like fight talk," said Mark Quinlan whose one brand of whiskey was Colonel's Monogram.

"Not this mornin'. I'm a little outmatched. If I'm shot down out here it will be murder. I rode out here alone but field glasses are watching us."

Red Quinlan grinned. "College shore makes a man smart, don't it, Tarbell? Mebbyso too smart. Well, boys, we'll be goin' back. Dry as it is, Tarbell, I'd say it was goin' to be a bad year for fires."

The three Quinlans and their men rode away across the burned strip. Tom sat his horse, watching them out of sight. Then from his pocket he took a vest-pocket tally book, its cover partly burned, the leaves scorched a little. Its pages were filled, not with brands and earmarks and

calf tallies, as such a book should be, but with names. Names of women and girls. In gilt letters on the red leather cover was printed the name of Frank Quinlan. Tom grinned faintly and pocketed the little book he had picked up at one of the spots where the prairie fire had been started.

AT the T Down ranch Old Man Jackson Tarbell and Buck Beeler played checkers for five cents a game: the Old Man in his wheel chair, his injured back propped with pillows, Buck in the rawhide-seated arm chair that was his favorite. There was a bottle and two glasses. Tobacco smoke hung in thin wisps in the front room. Both men were armed.

"That's twice I jumped your king," growled the Old Man testily. "Is that likker goin' to that bonehead of yourn or are you just naturally dumb?"

He was a tall, large-boned man, Jackson Tarbell, with white hair, drooping moustache and goatee. He had high cheekbones and deep-set gray eyes under heavy iron-gray brows. Weather had lined and bronzed his face, toil had gnarled his big-knuckled hands. When he smiled his eyes sparkled.

Buck Beeler filled the two small glasses. "Bet two-bits I take you to a cleanin' next game."

"Call that two-bit bet. You couldn't clean nothin' but a plate full of grub . . . or a six-shooter. Take a look outside with the glasses, Buck, and see if the smoke has died down."

Hour after hour these two old cowpunchers had tried to keep one another from worrying about the fire. Buck Beeler was more like a partner in the business than a foreman. And why not? He had gone through hell and high water with Jackson Tarbell. Jackson Tarbell had chosen to settle down. Buck had drifted, only to come back to the T Down ranch which he called home.

Even in these later years the urge to wander would grip old Buck. Jackson Tarbell knew the symptoms when he saw them coming on. Old Buck would start getting silent, absent-minded. He would get off his feed and mutter about his teeth bothering him or rheumatism or lumbago. Not even a few jolts of rye could lift him from the bog of misery. And when this had gone on for a week or so Jackson Tarbell would hand him a check book.

"Saddle up, you bow-legged little warthog and get out of my sight. Don't come back till you're over that bellyache or backache or whatever it is that ails you. Keep out of jail and don't git rolled. Beware of flashy lookin' strangers and fast women. And don't show back here with a checkered suit and a red necktie and a horseshoe stick pin made of glass diamonds, or sharp-pointed patent-leather button shoes that gripes your corns. Git."

Buck had never been able to live down that checked suit and red tie and the rest of the outfit that the Old Man had caught him wearing one night in Great Falls where he had been celebrating. That was some years ago but the Old Man never failed to recall it.

Now the two sat here, both of them longing with all their hearts to be out there at the prairie fire. When Buck went out with the field glasses, he stayed only a few minutes.

"Looks to me like they've about got 'er out. It's shady out on the porch now. Want to play out there?"

JACKSON TARBELL wheeled himself out onto the long veranda of the big log house. Buck fetched out the table and checker board and the bottle. Buck handed the field glasses over and for a long time the owner of the T Down watched the smoke of the prairie fire.

"They got it hogtied, looks like, Buck. Hope Tom didn't git into it with them

Quinlans. They're bad medicine, all three of 'em. That youngest is the most dangerous. He wants to be bad and he'll not need much proddin' along that line."

"I wish you could recollect just how you come to get shot," said Buck. "Likewise how you got that knot on your head that dented your skull. You wasn't shot off your horse. And the coulee where I found you wasn't where they shot you. You'd bin packed there and dumped for dead. I tracked the sign back as far as the edge of the badlands but it come a cloudbu'st and blotted out the tracks. You'd bin down there or I'm a Chinaman."

"I can't remember anything except that I saddled up and rode away from here right after breakfast. I was ridin' White Man. Next I know I'm in the hospital and they tell me I've bin there ten days. But there's somethin' that seems like a shadow acrost my brain. If I could wipe that away, I could remember, Buck. Hell, I've laid awake nights tryin' to think, tryin' to wipe out that shadow. No kin do. Like I told you before, there's only one thing that keeps hangin' in my brain . . . a branding fire. You're the only man that I've told that to. It don't make sense, Buck."

"I don't know about that. There was an empty shell in your gun when I fished it out of your holster. There might have bin a fight of some kind and they put your gun back in the holster when they dumped you in the coulee. I wish you'd let me tell Tom all this. That boy has a good head on him."

"Tom has enough to do, Buck, without pickin' up a grudge that would mean a killin', mebbyso. Let 'er ride for the present, anyhow. Later on we might let him know more, but not yet. Tom's a hotheaded young 'un and he might make a wrong play."

"I'll bet he don't. Tom's changed this last year. He's quit his wild ways. He's all man. If he wasn't I wouldn't have let him go off there this mornin' without me. Tom has a right to know what you and I know."

"We'll go into that later. Let's git on with this checker game. Two-bits this time."

They were still arguing and playing checkers late that afternoon when Tom and his men rode in. They were black with smoke, sweaty, and their horses were leg-weary. Tom unsaddled his horse and came on to the house.

"Hardly any of the range burned," he said, his white teeth showing through the black grime of his face.

"Have ary trouble with the Quinlans?" asked the Old Man.

"Not exactly. They rode over to the fire and I sent 'em back. That fire was set and the three Quinlans set it." He laid the empty whiskey flask and the scorched tally book on the table.

"Mark Quinlan's bottle. Frank's tally book. I found 'em where the fire started. I'm keepin' the tally book. I got a hunch it is goin' to come in handy."

CHAPTER THREE

Raw Beef

ARMED cowboys drawing fighting wages from the T Down patroled the range. They had orders to bring in any man they caught starting a fire. Tom was in the saddle from before daylight until dark. Often he was gone all night. There was a grim look on his face and he never had much to say.

Tom felt sick inside when he looked at the gaunt-flanked steers that needed grass and water, the long, winding trails that came down from the parched hills to the reservoirs that were only half full. When the cattle came to water in long strings,

the dust could be seen for miles. A crew of men were busy pulling cattle out of the bog. Other men spent their hours in the saddle drifting the cattle back from the water, back into the hills. It was hard to grin or hooraw with the boys these days. Unless tallow could be put on those steers it wouldn't pay to gather and ship 'em. Meanwhile expenses were piling up. Wages had to be paid and grub bought. Hay crews with contracts must be paid off. In two weeks the beef round-up would start.

"Don't let the Old Man know how bad a fix we're in," Tom kept telling old Buck, as if Jackson Tarbell, crippled though he was, could not read the signs.

"We won't let on, Tom," Buck would say. Buck knew that the Old Man knew how bad things were. Not that the Old Man ever made mention of it. He would sit in his wheel chair and play checkers or argue about everything under the sun, whittling and smoking and looking out across the country that was burning up under the merciless sun.

These were days and nights of torture for Tom. He looked as gaunt and starved as the cattle that shuffled along the rutted, dust-filled trails.

One morning he shaved and put on clean clothes. Buck looked at him questioningly.

"I'm goin' to town, Buck. Be back tomorrow or next day. I'm goin' to try to get enough money from the bank to buy feed for what beef we gather. We'll feed 'em till they're in shape to bring a fair price in Chicago. It's our only chance."

Old Buck nodded. He was almost sure that the Old Man had already tried to get another loan from the bank and had been turned down. But he didn't want to tell Tom.

"Good luck, Tom. Fetch home the bacon."

"Do my best, Buck. Take care of the Old Man till I get back." He stepped up on his top horse and rode away.

IT was late afternoon when Tom reached the little cow town of Rimrock. The bank was closed. Tom stabled his horse and got a room at the hotel.

"Last room we got, Tom," said the hotel man. Tom had noticed the flags and bunting and the crowds.

"What's the occasion? Don't tell me it's Fourth of July or Washington's Birthday."

"Labor Day. Didn't you know. Tomorrow's Labor Day. You'll be entering the roping and bronc riding, won't you?"

"Can't tell. I might. Is the bank closed tomorrow?"

"Sure. Rimrock is putting on a celebration. Dance tonight and tomorrow night. Tomorrow at ten in the morning the fun starts. Horse races, fat men's race, women's free-for-all race, potato race, greased-pig catching. Afternoon the cowboy contests. You got here just in time to get in on it all."

Tom nodded. He hadn't come to town to celebrate. He had come on a desperate mission and no longer had any heart for dancing and fun. He signed the register and asked for the big suitcase he always kept in the store room. He shook hands with several men he knew, and they stood there in the lobby talking of range conditions. They were taking it gamely, these ranchers who were looking disaster in the face. They were of pioneer stock, used to hard knocks.

"Butchered a beef the other day," said a grizzled old rancher who had the reputation of never eating his own meat, "and doggone, it was so tough I wore out my false teeth a chawin' on it."

"Must have bin one of mine," put in one of the old rancher's neighbors. The old rancher grinned and winked.

"Come to think back on it, I believe it was."

"Why don't you try one of Quinlan's sheep?" grinned another cowman.

The old rancher spat, hitting the brass cuspidor accurately. His wrinkled face spread in a grin.

"Sheep meat? I'd ruther starve, gents. And I ain't what a man might call choosey about his grub, neither."

These were men who had helped fight the prairie fire. Small outfits that fringed on the Quinlan and Tarbell ranges. Tom invited them in for a drink. His invitation included some nesters who had also been at the fire. They filed through the door that led from the lobby into the bar.

"Haven't had a chance to thank you men for helping out at the fire," he said as they lined up at the bar. "I'm doin' it now. Here's how, friends."

NOW, through the short swinging doors that led to the street, came the three Quinlans and several of their men. They were swaggering, all save the taciturn Mark who walked alone to the far end of the bar. Red was loud mouthed, boastful when drunk. He was drunk now, his spurs let out a hole so that they dragged along the floor. Frank, dressed in his town clothes, looked hard at Tom, then walked to the bar. Tom grinned a little, knowing that Frank Quinlan would be watching him in the bar mirror. Frank would be thinking about that tally book he had lost.

At the far end of the bar the blocky, sullen-lipped Mark Quinlan growled an order to the bartender who nodded and opened a bottle of Colonel's Monogram. Tom looked down the bar and caught Mark's eye as the latter lifted the bottle to pour a drink. For a long moment they looked at one another. Then Mark Quinlan filled his glass and drank it down.

Red Quinlan and his cowboys were grouped together at the bar. Red was telling a ribald story to an appreciative audience. Lots of men who hated Mark and Frank liked this big, coarse-tongued Red who loved to fight and sing and tell barroom stories. Unlike the other two brothers, the burly Red moved in the open. He liked to lay his cards on the table and defy any man to beat his hand. Thus it was he claimed a certain type of popularity among the rougher element. In town he was a free spender, boisterous, swaggering, uncouth and roaring a braggart's challenge. He wanted men to fear his prowess as a fighter, but he also wanted their friendship. Now he finished his story and his laugh drowned out the laughter of his listeners. He tossed off his drink, then walked over to where Tom was standing. There was a wide grin on his brick-red face.

"Any fires lately?" he asked.

"Not unless one has been set since I left the ranch this mornin'."

"It's a bad year for fires. Some careless gent drops a lighted cigarette butt or a match that ain't dead and if the wind is right there kin be a lot of damage done."

"And the gent that dropped that cigarette or match," said Tom as he leaned his back to the bar, "might run into some tough luck about that time. My men have orders to handle cases like that and handle 'em right. I sent you word to that effect just so there would not be any such mistakes on the part of the Q cowboys. I reckon I made it plain enough."

"Plenty plain. Me'n the boys like to got sick laughin' about it all. It sounded comical, for a fact."

"It won't feel comical, Red, if any Q man starts another fire. Bullets make a man sicker than laughin'."

Red laughed his big, booming laugh and walked back to his companions, his spurs dragging noisily along the floor.

Tom, white-lipped with a rage that made his stomach muscles quiver, stood

there. He saw the grins on the faces of the Q cowboys. He saw the dandified Frank smile faintly. There was a faint sneer on the face of the morose Mark.

Red Quinlan was saying something to his cowboys that made them laugh. They were all looking at Tom.

Tom reached down and unbuckled his spurs. He handed them, together with his six-shooter, to the grizzled old cowman who had the reputation of having an appetite for his neighbor's beef.

"Take care of these."

Tom walked up to Red Quinlan. "Drink up, Red. One of us is goin' to take one hell of a whippin'. Shed your gun and fight."

TOM, despite the fact that he was six feet tall and splendidly proportioned, looked small alongside this red-headed, rawboned giant who stood six feet four in his sock feet and had the arms of a gorilla. He outweighed Tom forty pounds or more and his big hands, covered with red hair, were powerful.

Red unbuckled his gun belt and handed it to one of his men. He poured himself a drink and gulped it, then he laid his hat on the bar. He looked around, a wide grin on his face.

"It won't take me long, gents. If he was twins I could lick 'em both without sweatin'."

Red's left swung in a swift arc. Tom ducked and the blow grazed the top of his head. Tom whipped in a short jolt that caught Red in the stomach. He followed it with a right that connected with Red's nose. But he took a hard uppercut that rocked him back on his heels. He sidestepped, ducking Red's swings.

The crowd watched in silence, save for muttered comments.

"That big red devil will murder Tom," said a nester.

"Tom will give him a run for his money, just the same. He's got science."

Red tried to force Tom into a clinch but Tom kept out of his way. Tom was fast on his feet and in good condition. He knew better than to let Red get him into a clinch. Those gorilla arms could break a man's back. Tom laced in lefts and rights that blinded the bigger man.

Red rushed again. Tom's well-timed swings had opened a cut above Red's left eye. Another hard left had landed on the injured eye and the pain of it shot through the big man's head. A few minutes and that eye would be closed. Wild with rage, Red charged, only to fan the air with his wild swings. Tom's footwork was bewildering. Red Quinlan had never before fought a skilled boxer.

"Quit your damned runnin' and fight," he snarled, rushing once more. Tom slid under a terrific left swing and ripped a hard hook into Red's belly. Red grunted, gasping for breath. Tom swung his left into Red's face, landing on the injured eye. Red stood on widespread legs, his back against the bar, his big fists knotted. He was breathing hard and his face was a bloody smear.

Tom had backed away. Tom's face was battered, his mouth cut and bleeding, and the ribs on his right side were hurting.

"Come on and fight, you damned jumpin'-jack," grunted Red. "Fight like a man and I'll break every bone in your damned carcass."

Tom grinned. "Get away from the bar, you bellowin' coward. You're as yellow as hell, Quinlan. Come on and get the rest of it. Come on and take some more medicine."

RED came slowly this time, cautiously, his long arms swinging. When he had advanced a few feet from the bar, Tom stepped in. The unexpected attack bewildered the big Red who, up until now

had been the aggressor. Tom's fists ripped in with trip hammer force, doubling Red up, staggering him. Hard, solid jolts rocked Red's head sideways. Short hooks and jabs were knocking his wind. Tom drove him back to the bar. Red fought blindly, clumsily. Then a well-timed swing landed and Red went down on his hands and knees.

"Tromp his guts out, Tom!" yelled someone. "Kick his head off! You got the big bum!"

But Tom stepped back, breathing a little heavily. He had broken his left hand and pain throbbed through his arm from knuckles to elbow. Somebody threw a pail of water on the groggy Red as he got slowly to his feet. Another man poured a beer glass full of whiskey down the fighter's throat.

"Go in and kill him," growled Mark Quinlan. "Quit doggin' it, damn you!"

Red snarled like an animal. He swung at Mark with his open hand—like the slap of a grizzly. Mark reeled backwards. With a bellow of defiance Red charged Tom. But Tom was once more on the defensive. He avoided the clumsy rush and landed a left to Red's good eye, then he danced back out of range of those flailing arms

Red, despite his weight and his long reach, was losing. It was the first time Rimrock and this part of the cow country had ever seen Red Quinlan take a beating. Tom Tarbell was giving it to him now. Giving it with clean, fair fighting.

Rimrock did not know that Tom Tarbell had been heavyweight champion at college; that he had spent many a Saturday working out at San Francisco's Olympic Club, taking lessons from Jim Corbett and other great ring fighters. They saw only Jackson Tarbell's boy Tom whipping hell out of big Red Quinlan and they wondered how he could do it.

The news of the fight had spread like wildfire. The saloon was packed. Men were standing on chairs and tables and on the bar. Outside they fought to get in. Tom Tarbell was taking Red Quinlan to a real cleaning. And save for the Quinlan crowd, every man was cheering Tom.

The cheers of the crowd maddened Red Quinlan to the red point of insanity. Cursing, slobbering, spitting blood, he rushed, time and again, only to be stopped by punishing rights and lefts. His one chance was to corner Tom into a clinch.

Red, his breath coming in heaving gasps, stood once more with his back to the bar. Mark handed him another heavy jolt of whiskey. Frank threw a bucket of ice water into his battered face. Tom, bloody, somewhat battered, waited. Somebody offered him whiskey but he shook his head. He took a mouthful of water, swashed it around in his mouth, then spat it out.

"Come on, Quinlan, and get the rest of it," he said. "Let's get it over with."

Frank Quinlan whispered something in Red's ear. Red nodded. Then the fight was on once more.

Red's legs were getting weak. His rushes lacked force. But his long arms still seemed to retain their power. He was manouvering with desperate cunning now, saving his strength. He managed to block Tom's next haymaker.

Red made a quick rush. Tom danced backwards. Then it happened. Happened so suddenly that few men saw the trick. A rope tripped him from behind as he back-pedaled . . . jerked him down on his back. Then the rope was pulled from sight and lost in the crowd. And Red Quinlan was on top of Tom, gouging and pounding with his terrible hairy fists. In vain Tom tried to wriggle from under that heavy bulk. Pain, red pain stabbed his eyes and brain. He fought desperately. Everything was going black.

FRANK and Mark Quinlan were holding the crowd back with their guns.

"Let 'em fight," growled Mark Quinlan. "Tarbell asked for what he's gettin'."

"Anybody that tries to pull Red off gets hurt," added Frank, gesturing with his pearl handled .45. "Stand back."

Then a tall, broad-shouldered man with iron gray hair pushed through the crowd. There was a sheriff's badge pinned to his vest. His eyes blazed with anger.

Ignoring the guns of Frank and Mark Quinlan, he strode swiftly across the open space and jerked Red Quinlan backwards.

"That'll be about all of that, Red. Get on your legs and get out of here or I'll throw you in the can."

Tom got unsteadily to his feet. His eyes burned like two hot coals and he stood unsteadily.

"Let us finish it, Sheriff," he said, wiping blood from his mouth. "Let me take him on again."

"You had him licked half a dozen times, Tom. It took all three of the Quinlans to put you on your back. I saw it all. He's licked. He and his brothers and his cowboys are saddling up and going back to the Q ranch. Red, clear out. Take your gang with you. Rimrock is too small to hold you and me both. Git."

"We'll pull out," said Red, his one bloodshot eye glinting with an ugly light. "But listen here, we got our rights as citizens. We're comin' back and you haven't the right to stop us. We're free, white, and citizens of Montana. Come on, boys."

"Don't come back unless you're hunting trouble," said the sheriff grimly.

Red buckled on his gun. "We rode to Rimrock to celebrate Labor Day. We aim to have our fun." He shouldered his way through the crowd, followed by Frank and Mark and the Q cowboys.

Tom got his suitcase and went upstairs to his room. He grinned ruefully at his reflection in the mirror. One eye was discolored and closing. His mouth was bleeding and torn and his face was bruised and swollen. He turned on the water in the bathtub. He was undressing when the grizzled old cowman who had held his gun and spurs came in with a huge raw beefsteak.

"For that eye of yourn, Tom. Damned if it ain't the first hunk of steer meat I ever bought in my life."

CHAPTER FOUR

Son of a Fighter

A GARRULOUS old rascal, that rancher who had brought the raw beefsteak, he was an undersized, bow-legged, bald-headed man married to a large, full-breasted woman who domineered him. They had several children, ranging in age from five to eighteen. His oldest boy worked, off and on, for the T Down, wrangling horses and doing jobs around the ranch. The rancher's name was Henry Smale but the cow country called him "Sleeper."

In the vernacular of the range to "sleeper mark" a calf is to earmark it but not brand it. Cowboys working a herd will see an earmarked calf with its mother. Cutting cattle is a matter of reading earmarks as well as brands. And a cowboy might easily overlook the fact that the calf is unbranded if he is cutting cattle or roping calves to drag to the branding fire. Later on in the fall, about weaning time, the man who has sleeper-marked the calf will locate it, wean it, change the earmark and put his own brand and earmark on it. And Henry Smale's double crop took care of most earmarks. So he was known as Sleeper Smale and, in his own way, gloried in the monicker.

The bigger outfits like the T Down and other spreads could have caught Sleeper butchering beef or stealing a calf now

and then, but they never bothered him. Life was hard-scratching for the little old rancher. He worked hard, putting up hay and riding after his cattle. His wife raised chickens and vegetables. The children all worked at their chores. Whenever a cowboy passed by the Smale ranch and stopped he was sure to be treated to fried chicken and dried-apple pie and real biscuits with home-churned butter. Ma Smale was as good a cook as could be found in the cow country.

Sleeper's one weak spot, outside his fondness for another man's beef, was his love for a whiskey bottle. Several years ago Ma Smale had the saloon men put Sleeper on the Injun List. Meaning that he was not allowed to take a drink over the bar. Like an Indian he could not buy or accept a drink of whiskey.

Tom, splashing in the bathtub, listened to Sleeper's rambling talk. The hotel man had brought up a quart of his best whiskey and left it on the dresser. Tom grinned as he saw the little old rancher's eyes watching the uncorked bottle.

"Got a corkscrew, Sleeper?" he asked.

No skilled gunman ever pulled a six-shooter more rapidly than Sleeper Smale produced a corkscrew. Tom soaped the blood from his face and chuckled softly. He liked Sleeper. The Old Man had always helped the Smale family through the winters when they needed money to buy grub.

Sleeper and Tom had a drink together. Sleeper took a second one, then resolutely corked the bottle. He brought out some round peppermint and wintergreen discs and munched them to sweeten his breath. Ma Smale had a nose for liquor.

"How you fixed for hay at the T Down, Tom?" he asked.

"We're way short, Sleeper. Afraid we'll have a tough time of it."

"Hard lines, Tom. Me, I got ten times more'n I kin use. My alfalfy crop was a dinger. I had plenty of water and I'd put in a extra hundred acres at my lower place. Tell your daddy he's plumb welcome to it. He kin send over a man to help me feed what pore cattle you send over. Me and Ma was talkin' about it just the other day. Looks like it's a good chance to pay you and your daddy back for all you done for us and the kids. Tell Jackson there's hay a-plenty and some left over."

"But look here, Sleeper, hay's goin' to be worth plenty of money in a few months."

"It ain't worth half the price of a man's friendship, is it? Red Quinlan tried to dicker with me. I told him I'd done sold it to Jackson Tarbell. Now don't you go makin' a liar outa me, young feller. Now git that raw steak on your face. You got to look part human if you're goin' to swing the gals at the dance tonight."

There was a tight lump in Tom's throat just now. Little old Sleeper Smale and his hay. Tom had seen the haystacks. The biggest hay crop in that part of the country. Enough hay to feed those steers and enough to winter a lot of cattle besides.

"I'll talk it over with you tomorrow, Sleeper. And thanks a million. I'll pay you a good price for the hay."

"Mind if I take a little nip, Tom?"

"Have at it."

"Dang, Tom, that was a scrap. Never see the like of it. I was scared he'd kill yuh. It's the first lickin' that big red-muzzled son ever taken around here. Wait till I tell Ma about it. She hates them Quinlans like poison. Whenever Frank Quinlan dances with our Helen, Ma has big fits and little 'uns. Well, here's lookin' at you, Tom. Here's to yuh."

STILL wearing the marks of his fight, Tom went to the dance at the schoolhouse. Not because he had any desire for dancing but mainly because he hoped he

might get a chance to talk to the president of the bank who, as mayor of Rimrock, would be officiating there.

There was a big crowd there: ranchers and their families, some cowboys, townspeople. Rimrock, like all cow towns, liked to celebrate holidays. It made a break in the dull routine of ranch life.

The doctor had fixed Tom's hand but it still pained a lot. He carried it in a sling made of a black silk neckscarf. The fracture had been slight—only two knuckles knocked down.

Sleeper Smale and his family were there. Sleeper, sitting on the bench alongside his buxom wife, looked subdued and meek. Helen, the oldest one of the children, just eighteen, sat beside her father. She had thick, curly brown hair and soft brown eyes. Her cheeks and lips were red, her teeth very white—an attractive girl, even if she lacked the polish of town life. She kept watching the door covertly. Tom frowned a little. He had heard more than once that Helen Smale and Frank Quinlan had been seen together riding back in the hills. Girls fell hard for Frank. Tom had seen Helen Smale's name in Frank's tally book.

Now Tom spotted Mayor Luther Freeman, the banker, with his wife and a party of friends. Luther Freeman was tall, dignified looking with his silvery hair and closely-clipped moustache. He had blue-gray eyes that were cold, appraising. There was nothing genuine about his smile or his handshake.

He lived with his snobbish wife in a two-story brick house with a big lawn and shrubs and flower beds. They were always entertaining out of town people from Helena or Great Falls or Butte. They had a crowd with them now; a crowd that were obviously amused at the novelty of attending a cow town dance. Most of them were young people.

Nearly every man here in the dance hall was more or less obligated to Freeman's bank. He had advanced them loans on their stock and their ranches. The bank held mortgages on most of their places. Many of those mortgages would be foreclosed. The ranchers feared him. They dreaded that day when they must go to the bank and ask for an extension on their loan. Freeman would smile his clammy smile and shake his head and tell them that he was very, very sorry but the banking laws would not permit an extension.

Luther Freeman bade fair to own a lot of valuable land before the winter was over. Not for pleasure had this shrewd banker left the gayety of city life to build a banking business in a small cow town. Once he had gained what he aimed at, he could retire and return to the big cities—New York, Paris, a trip around the world. And these ranchers, broke, homeless, would be paying for it all.

Tom hated Luther Freeman because he saw through him and the game he was playing. He would rather take the worst licking that Red Quinlan could hand him than to ask a favor of the banker. But hay cost money and those cattle needed feed if they were going to bring any kind of price at the Chicago stockyards.

TOM saw Luther Freeman leave his crowd and start for the door. This was Tom's chance. For the Old Man's sake he'd do it.

"I'd like to have a few minutes of your time, Mr. Freeman," Tom said as they met just outside the schoolhouse.

"I'm rather busy, young man. And I don't talk business after hours."

"But the bank is closed tomorrow and I have to get back to the ranch. Mr. Freeman, if we can't raise money to buy feed for the stuff we want to ship, we'll lose everything. But I can feed those steers for a few weeks, ship 'em, and come out

ahead. It's our one chance in the game. We'll be able to pay you every dollar we owe you."

"I can't see your proposition, young man. It's a bad risk. You're a bad risk. You come to Rimrock hoping to get a loan from the bank. You carouse around, get into a saloon brawl, and now, with the smell of whiskey on your breath you are presumptuous enough to ask me to talk business. Good evening."

Tom stood there, fists clenched, his temper at white heat. He'd taken too much that evening.

"Get away from me, Freeman, before I smash that slimy smile off your face. To hell with you and your money. Get away from me, damn you!"

Tom's voice had risen in the heat of his anger. Men standing around heard. Among them was Sleeper Smale who had managed to slip outside for a nip.

Another man had overheard. That man was the sheriff. He laid a hand on Tom's shoulder.

"Take it easy, Tom. You've had enough fighting for one day. That's no way to talk to our honorable mayor." He winked and took Tom's arm.

"Sheriff," snapped Luther Freeman, "that man is drunk and he's dangerous. He threatened me. Lock him up. I want him put under a heavy peace bond. Rowdyism is something I won't tolerate. I'll swear out the warrant for his arrest. I'll be responsible. Lock him up. I'll take care of his case in the morning."

BANKER FREEMAN strutted off and the sheriff arrested Tom.

"I had to do it, Tom," he said ruefully. "That temper of yours will get you into real trouble some day. Freeman is a bad man to cross, especially these times."

"I should have kept my mouth shut, I know. But he's such a slimy snake. He's robbin' everybody in the country. Somebody should stick up that bank of his."

"That's no way to talk, Tom. Listen, you ain't going to jail. We'll go down to the judge's house and settle it there. A ten dollar fine for cussin' out the mayor. I'll arrange for the peace bond. Then you'd better pull out for home."

"I've got all the Labor Day excitement I want," grinned Tom. "It's white of you, sheriff, to let me off."

The judge was an old-timer. He had known Tom since the latter was a small boy. He wore a flannel night shirt and a wide brimmed hat.

"I'll take ten dollars off you, Tom. We'll fix the peace bond later. So far as I'm concerned you can take a poke at his honor the mayor and it'll be ten more. And now that you're in town, stay and have a good time tomorrow. I'd like to see you enter the bronc riding and roping. Think you can do much with that bunged-up hand?"

"I reckon I could try."

The judge turned to the old lawman. "Keep him in town, Sheriff. I got some money that says Tom Tarbell will outride and out-rope Frank Quinlan."

"Frank Quinlan won't be here. I told the Quinlans to leave town."

"They didn't go. They showed up with that lawyer of theirs and had me over a barrel. You can't run a man out of town without good and sufficient cause. And there wasn't enough against the Quinlans to warrant running them out of town. Times have changed. Rimrock today ain't the Rimrock we lived in twenty years ago. A shark like Freeman runnin' the town and half the county, aimin' to be state senator. Barb wire strung acrost the country. The stink of sheep in a man's nostrils. . . ."

The judge seemed deeply moved. "And this is what you and me and Jackson Tarbell and Buck Beeler fought to get when

we crossed the plains. Bankers-law-sharps. . . . I never needed a law book to decide any case that has come up in the past twenty-five years. Right was right and wrong was wrong and a one-eyed deaf man could tell which was which. But now these shysters fetch up law books and point out to a Justice of the Peace what to do and how to do it. Hell of a note. Here's a legal paper, son, givin' you the right to enjoy yourself. If you don't beat Frank Quinlan's roping time I'll fine you what I lose. Speaking of fines, I'm remitting this ten dollar fine. I had a ringside seat at the fight. It was worth ten of any man's money. Gentlemen, let's drink to the T Down outfit and the fighting son of a fighting father."

CHAPTER FIVE

Bad Year for Fires

TOM did not go back to the dance. He wanted to be alone. He wanted to think things out. He left the sheriff and went to the hotel. He felt tired and lame. Red had handed him some tough punishment and it was beginning to tell on him. His eyes and head ached. His ribs were sore and his broken hand hurt from finger tips to shoulder. All that was nothing, though, compared to the fact that he had failed utterly in his attempt to raise money from the bank. He had failed the Old Man—that was what hurt so badly. Sick at heart, bruised of body, he went into the hotel lobby.

It was deserted, save for the night clerk who was snoring behind the desk. Tom got his key from its pigeon hole. The bar room next door was quiet. Everybody in town was at the dance. From the distance came the whistle of a locomotive. The West Bound was about due.

It had been months since Tom had heard the whistle of an engine, since he had seen a train. He quit the hotel and walked over to the depot, a hundred yards away. There was something about a train that pinched Tom's heart a little. That train had carried him away to California, to college. It was the connecting link between the line camp, the snow and sleet and drouth and hardships, and the happy-go-lucky life at the university.

He stood there on the wide plank platform. Except for the station agent with his baggage truck, he was alone. The West Bound never stopped at Rimrock unless it was flagged or there was a passenger aboard. Tom watched the headlight glare as it swung around the bend. Now it roared up, steam hissing, brakes tightening as it stopped. Loaded with passengers going somewhere beyond.

Tom stood there, taking it all in, his heart beating a little faster. Then the highball from the conductor to go ahead. The big locomotive puffing, blowing steam. The engineer working a long lever. Slowly the train picked up speed. Tom watched its lights fade into the night.

Then he became aware of voices. A woman's voice and the voice of the station agent.

"Sorry I can't carry those bags over to the hotel, lady, but I have to stay on duty. The night clerk should be over here with his push cart, but I think he's been celebrating a little."

"I can make it in two trips, thank you. I'll manage. I'm used to doing things for myself."

Tom roused from his dreams. The station agent hailed him.

"Hi, there, Tom. Would you mind helping this lady with her luggage?"

"Mighty glad to." Tom walked over to the girl and the station agent.

"Lady, this is Tom Tarbell from the T Down outfit. He'll take proper care of you, the same as you were his sister or mother."

THE girl was dressed in a gray suit and a small gray hat. Tom saw, there in the light that came from the depot window, that she was altogether too good looking to be traveling around alone. He lifted his buckskin colored Stetson and grinned. The grin hurt his bruised face and he became suddenly aware of the fact that he had a black eye and a face that was bruised. He saw her looking at him a little astonished. Then she laughed and held out her hand.

"I'm Jane Hunt. I'm going to teach school out in the country. I'm to stay with some people named Smale."

"Neighbors of mine, Miss Hunt. Fine people. Excuse this face of mine. It's not permanent."

At the hotel, Tom shook the clerk awake. "This lady wants a room."

"Not a room left in the house, Tom. We've even got cots in the hall."

Tom turned to the girl. He saw now that she had hazel eyes and a few freckles on her short nose. Her hair was black with reddish tints.

"I'll stake you to my room. I left it in somewhat of a mess but we can clean it up in a few minutes."

Despite her protests he took her bags up to his room. Boots, overalls, spurs, a carbine, blood-smeared clothes were scattered around. A partly empty whiskey bottle stood on the dresser where Sleeper Smale had reluctantly left it.

The girl in the gray suit looked at the room, then at Tom, and she laughed.

"Pardon me for laughing, but this is just too great for words. All this . . . And it's the first time I was ever west. I'm from a little pokey town near Boston. I've never seen a cowboy except in moving pictures. I'm acting terribly rude and I know it. I'm sorry."

Tom grinned widely and started gathering up his blood-spattered clothes.

"So I'm the first cowhand you ever met? And I look like I'd been arguing with a mountain lion. Somethin' to write home about, huh? But you haven't seen anything yet. Wait till tomorrow. Lady, it's goin' to be some noisy when they start comin' from the dance. But just don't pay any attention. The boys might cuss a little and sing some and there might be a fight or two out on the street or in the hall, but don't mind. Keep your door locked. They don't bother women in this country, anyhow. I'll bed down outside the door. If you get scared, just rap on the door. Now I'll clean up that bathroom."

"Don't. I'm not helpless. I feel bad enough as it is, taking your room. I'll mop up around here. Just because I'm a tenderfoot is no sign I can't do things. Leave your things in here. In the morning after I'm dressed, the room is yours again."

She held out her hand. "Thank you."

TOM rustled a cot and some blankets and went to sleep in the hall outside the door of the room where Jane Hunt was spending her first night in Montana. It was a fitful sleep, broken every now and then by those returning from the dance. Then, again, Tom kept thinking of Jane Hunt. He had always thought girls from the east were spineless and silly. This girl was different. She was tanned just enough to bring out the color of health. The grip of her hand was that of an athlete. He grinned to himself and got his injured hand into a position that was more comfortable. No wonder she laughed. He must have been a perfect picture of what the tenderfoot girl dreams of a cowboy. . . .

Tom was lying on his cot, fully dressed except for his boots, and rolling a cigarette about dawn when the Quinlans came down the dimly-lit hallway. Red, badly battered, drunk, was singing Sam Bass.

Mark, scowling, sullen, followed him down the narrow hall that was lined with makeshift cots. Behind them came some of the Q cowboys.

Red halted, a leering grin on his swollen face. "It's goin' to be a bad summer for fires, Tom. And a hard winter for pore cattle. Just had a talk with Luther Freeman. He's a good business man. Knows where to loan money. Knows a good bet when he sees one. Luther and the Q outfit are all the same one now. The Quinlans hold nearly half the stock in the bank right now. And Luther Freeman is backing the Q outfit to the limit. Sweet dreams, Tom."

They moved on down the hall, spurs dragging. The Quinlan outfit went into their room, banged the door shut. Red was singing hoarsely. Tom lay there on his cot, feeling beaten, baffled, helpless. He lay on one elbow, smoking, trying to think. He had forgotten the girl inside his room.

NOW, down the hallway, staggered Sleeper Smale, and Sleeper was drunk. He groped his way along the hall, lighting matches to read the numbers on the doors. He halted by Tom's bunk.

"What's wrong, Sleeper?"

"Gawd! That you, Tom? Bin huntin' you." His voice shook and his face muscles twitched.

"What's the trouble?" asked Tom.

"It's Helen, Tom. She ain't showed up. She left the dance about midnight with Frank Quinlan, her ma says. Just disappeared. I was outside havin' a few nips with Red. He wanted to dicker for my hay. Tom, I must have passed out. The missus is throwin' water on me when I come to. She tells me Helen is gone."

"Flop down on this cot, Sleeper. I'll fetch Helen back. You get some rest. Where are you folks stoppin'?"

"We're camped below town about a mile. In the box-elder park along the river bank. I'm . . . I'm sick. . . ."

"Sleep it off, old timer. I'll locate Helen." Tom buckled on his gun belt and pulled on his hat.

Down in the deserted lobby of the hotel, Tom consulted the little red tally book that had once been the property of Frank Quinlan. Frank, who boasted of his many conquests. The book in which were kept the names of girls and the names of trysting places. Tom scanned the scorched pages. Then he put the little tally book back in his pocket. Less than half an hour later, just as the first gray of dawn marked the sky, Tom rode up to a small ranch down the river. There sounded the squawk of a fiddle, voices, laughter, the shuffling of feet. A dozen couples were dancing in there to the tune of a drunken fiddler. A motley gathering of Q cowboys and 'breeds crowded the place. Helen Smale was sitting in a corner with Frank Quinlan. She was crying and her face was white. Frank was smiling and talking to her.

Tom came in the back door. Nobody seemed to notice him. Now he stood there, his gun covering Frank Quinlan.

"It's past Helen's bed time, Quinlan," he said in a low tone. "She's goin' home. That fancy tally book of yours I picked up at the prairie fire set by the Quinlans helped me to locate you here. I've scratched out Helen's name, but I'm keeping the book for evidence of your part in the setting of that fire. Make a gun play or call for help and I'll kill you. Come on, both of you. And leave your gun on the bench, Frank. You won't need it."

It was all done so quickly, so quietly that nobody knew what was going on. Tom herded Frank Quinlan outside. Helen, frightened and silent, let Tom take her arm and lead her out of the place.

Outside, Tom shoved his gun back in

its holster. Twice he swung at the tipsy Frank Quinlan. Those two terrific rights laid the other man prone. Then Tom bound and gagged him and dragged him into the brush.

"Now, Helen, we'll get on home. I'll pick you a gentle pony out of the ones there are at the hitch rack. Now quit cryin'. Everything is goin' to be all right."

IT WAS sunrise when Tom got back to the hotel. He had left Helen at the Smale camp there in the box-elder grove —a tearful, very repentant Helen. Her mother had taken her in her arms and wiped away the girl's tears.

Tom woke Sleeper and told him the news. Sleeper was afraid to go back.

"The missus will skin me alive, Tom. And I'm shaky. I need a bracer."

Tom rapped on the door of his room.

Jane Hunt, in her gray suit, opened the door. Morning is a test for any woman. This girl from near Boston was passing that test with honors.

"Sleep all right, ma'am?" Tom asked.

"Spendid," lied Jane. "And you?"

"Like a log."

They looked at one another and laughed. Then Jane saw Sleeper Smale, a crestfallen, bow-legged little man with bleary eyes. Sleeper was sitting on the cot, pulling on his boots.

"The room," said Jane, "is yours now. I'm having breakfast, then going out on the stage to the Smale ranch."

"Better wait till tomorrow," said Tom. "There's nobody home at the Smale ranch. Everybody is in town for the holiday. I'd be proud to show you around the town."

Inside the room, Tom poured a stiff drink for Sleeper. They stood there, looking at one another. For a long moment neither man spoke.

"Helen is all right, Tom?"

"All right, Sleeper. Straighten up now and go on to the camp. Everything is all right. They're waitin' for you."

Sleeper, whose jags were often apt to become weepy, blew his nose and took another drink.

"Think the missus is all right, Tom?"

"Sure. Lope on to camp."

"Tom, I ain't forgettin' this."

Tom let him out of the room. Then he ran cold water in the tub and took a bath. After that he put on his old overalls and boots and a gray flannel shirt. He had the doctor tape his injured hand, then walked down the street to the barn and looked after his horse. Back at the hotel he met the three Quinlans. Frank glared at him but said nothing. Red leered, his face discolored and his eyes swollen almost shut.

"Got a thousand dollars," he said to the bartender, "or ten times that much that says Frank wins the ridin', ropin' and doggin'. I'd like to cover some T Down money."

CHAPTER SIX

Freeman's Treachery

THERE was no T Down money being bet. The T Down outfit was broke. On the other hand there was plenty of Quinlan money in circulation. In spite of his injured hand, Tom had confidence in himself and would have covered all Quinlan money that they could put up.

He spent the bigger part of the morning showing Jane Hunt around town. They watched the races and ate peanuts and popcorn-balls and drank homemade lemonade. Then Tom turned her over to Ma Smale. Little old Sleeper had shaved and put on a clean shirt and new overalls. He looked subdued and was not feeling well. Helen was quiet and her eyes showed signs of weeping.

Freckle-faced Chuck Smale had won

the boys' pony race and foot race and Tom's words of praise made his day a complete success. Tom left Jane at the Smale camp at the box-elder park eating cold fried chicken and all that went with it. Ma Smale fussed over her. Jane had taken an instant liking to the family.

"I have to take care of my horse," Tom told Jane. "Mrs. Smale will take good care of you."

Tom slipped Sleeper a small bottle. "Hair of the dog that bit you, Sleeper. Hit 'er easy today."

Tom drove back to town in the livery rig he had hired. There were some cowboys loafing around, swapping yarns, whittling, joshing one another. There were a few Q cowboys in the crowd that squatted on spurred boot heels in the shade. They were trying to make bets on Frank Quinlan.

"Sorry I can't call that money," Tom said, "but a man can't bet what he hasn't got."

"You ain't the only man in that same fix," said a rancher. "Wish I had a few dollars to bet on you."

There was a feeling of tension in town. The three Quinlans kept together and with them were always a few of their toughest cowboys. Rumor had it that the Q outfit was planning to paint the little cow town of Rimrock a brilliant red. Their spurs were, in the parlance of the range, let out to the town hole. They wore their guns openly, with a swaggering defiance. Now and then one of the boys would buck his horse down the street. Trouble was coming gathering slowly like a blackening storm cloud.

DOWN the street, in his big brick house, Luther Freeman entertained his guests from the city with cocktails and champagne and the sort of food that was unknown to the cow country people. There was music and laughter and hilarity of a different sort than could be found down the street at the Last Chance or the Maverick or the Silver Dollar or the Bucket of Blood. Luther Freeman could well afford to entertain with a lavish hand. He had just completed a deal with the Quinlans whereby he was certain to reap a rich harvest. He had worked in with the shrewd but crooked attorney hired by the Quinlans. He had bought off the attorney. The contracts contained certain clauses that would, in due time, ruin the Quinlans. In the not so far away future it would mean half a million dollars clear.

He ordered more champagne for his guests. They were going to attend the rodeo that afternoon. Freeman had a special box built, shaded from the sun, decorated with bunting and flags. From this shaded box the mayor of Rimrock and his dude guests would watch men sweat and get grimy and bloody and bruised out there in the hot sun. And when the contests were over the white-clad mayor with his long, iced drink, his straw hat, his crooked smile and well chosen words, would award the prizes.

Up in the small judges' stand sat the sheriff and two other judges and with them sat old Buck Beeler. Buck, in his town clothes, his puckered eyes squinting into the sun, watching Freeman and his guests arrive.

"Dudes," he muttered. "Look at 'em."

"Better get on down out of the stand, Buck," advised the sheriff. "Nobody but the judges allowed up here. And don't get into trouble."

"I bet the last dollar the T Down had in the bank," said Buck Beeler, testily, "that Tom would win the ridin', ropin' and doggin'. We only had a couple of thousand to bet, but I bet it. The Old Man sent me in to back Tom and here I am. There's T Down money in town. Every cowboy that rode in with me is coverin' Quinlan money. All we ask is a square deal. After we collect our bets

the T Down outfit is takin' the town away from the Quinlans. See yuh later!"

SUNDOWN. A deserted grandstand. Dust still hanging in the air. Dried sweat-caked men and horses. Tom looked at Buck Beeler and the T Down cowboys who were waiting for him behind the chutes.

"Now, will you tell a man just what sent you all to town?" Tom asked.

"The Old Man. We got word that you'd whupped Red Quinlan and was enterin' the contests. So we taken what money we had and rode in. The Old Man give us orders to bet our last dime, and we done it. Called every Q dollar they had put up. And when I heard you'd busted a hand I don't mind sayin'. I said a fond farewell to our diners. Then you come out on that big roan bronc and put up the purtiest ride a man ever watched. Then you come within half a second of the world's record in the steer ropin'. And the way you dogged that steer was somethin' to write back home about. The Old Man will shore be happy. I sent a boy to the ranch with the news. Tom, you won us enough to run the outfit this fall. The Q outfit is payin' our round-up expenses."

Tom, powdered with dust, streaked with sweat, sat his horse. He looked at the decorated box where Luther Freeman had, with a few brief, skillfully sarcastic words, presented him with the prizes in the three events Tom had entered.

"I'm afraid, Buck," he said slowly, "that there won't be any beef gathering. Those steers need hay and feed. We haven't enough money to buy it. I licked Red Quinlan. I beat Frank Quinlan today. But that ain't savin' the T Down outfit. I didn't have any luck with Luther Freeman. I gummed the cards, Buck. Got into a row with Freeman. We can't get a dollar from him I've made a mess of it."

"Did you take a few pokes at Freeman?"

"No. No, I didn't hit him."

"Why the hell didn't you? Shucks, Tom, you didn't have a chance of gettin' a loan from that dude. He ain't human. We won't be the only outfit he'll close out before next summer. He's got about every spread in the country corraled."

"Except the Quinlans," replied Tom grimly. "Freeman and the Quinlan outfit are all the same one now."

"Mmmm. Well, let's get up town and clean up. Got a room where us boys can shave and change clothes?"

Tom grinned a little. "I'll have to find out, Buck. I'll have to ask the lady."

"Lady? What in. . . ."

"I loaned my room to a lady. A schoolmarm from Boston."

Old Buck Beeler groaned.

Back in town, they took care of their horses and went to the hotel. The lobby was crowded. Tom was about to ask the hotel clerk for Jane Hunt when he saw her sitting over in a corner talking to Luther Freeman and his party. She seemed to be very animated. Tom turned to Buck.

"I reckon we can get washed up at the barber shop. Or down at the river."

As he walked out of the hotel Tom recalled something that had slipped his mind in the excitement of the afternoon. When he had ridden up to the mayor's box he thought he had caught a glimpse of Jane Hunt among Luther Freeman's guests. But the sun had been in his eyes. Now he knew that it must have been Jane whom he had seen. She had been wearing dark sun glasses. But there was no doubt about it, she had been one of Freeman's guests. As Tom and Buck and the cowboys went into the bar-room Tom saw her leave with the Freeman party. She was laughing and Luther Freeman had her arm.

THE sheriff found Tom in the barber shop and called him outside. He looked tired and worried.

"Tom," he said, "I know it ain't fair to you but if you and Buck Beeler and your cowboys would pull out of town, it might save a lot of trouble tonight. The Quinlans are actin' ugly. I'm short-handed for deputies that have guts and cool heads. I know you boys want to celebrate. You got good reason to. I wouldn't ask you to quit town if I didn't feel you'd savvy how I feel about it."

"I've had enough town to last me a while," replied Tom. "I'll gather Buck and the boys and we'll haul freight."

"That's almighty white of you, Tom. By the way, I ain't seen you. Luther Freeman swore out a warrant for your arrest but seems like the judge mislaid it somewheres. The charge was threatenin' his life or somethin'. Say howdy to your dad for me."

"You bet."

Tom found Buck Beeler in the hotel bar-room. Buck was visibly disappointed when Tom gave him the sheriff's message. So were the T Down cowboys, but they took it with a grin.

The hotel man handed Tom a sealed note. It was from Jane Hunt.

> Dear Mr. Tarbell:
>
> So grateful for the use of your room. I won't be needing it any longer as some friends of mine from the East, the Freemans, insist on my spending a week with them until it is time for me to take my school.
>
> Congratulations on your victories today. You were splendid. Hope to see you again. And once more, thanks.
>
> Sincerely,
>
> Jane Hunt.

Tom crumpled the note and shoved it in the pocket of his overalls. He felt disappointed in Jane Hunt. Tonight she would be at Luther Freeman's brick house, dancing and having a good time. The mayor was giving a supper and dance at his home for his guests. In a week or so Luther Freeman would undoubtedly drive Jane Hunt out to the humble ranch of the Smales where she was to board during the nine months of the school term. That news would spread around the country. Everybody would know that the new schoolmarm was a friend of the Freemans. And Luther Freeman was the man whose greedy, well-kept hands were squeezing their last dollars from them. Jane Hunt would have no easy time of it, there at her little country school where her pupils ranged from six to eighteen years of age.

On their way out of town, Tom and his T Down cowboys passed the Smales in their Democrat wagon. Sleeper and Ma Smale were on the seat. The family sat on blankets and straw in the wagon bed. Chuck rode alongside. Ma Smale's smile seemed forced. Sleeper looked uneasy, ill at ease. Tom thought Helen looked like she had been crying again. It was a significant fact that the Smales were not staying over for the fireworks and dance tonight. Usually they were the first to arrive and the last to leave.

Ma Smale handed Tom a slip of paper. "Give that to your father, Tom. It's a legal bill of sale for all the hay we have. He can pay us off at his own price when he gets the money. Give him our best regards. And Tom, I just out and bawled today when you beat that . . . that dirty snake. I felt that good I took pa off the Injun list. Pa, give the boys all a drink."

They drank from Sleeper's jug, passed him their bottles for a nip, then rode on. There was a lump in Tom's throat. The Smales had saved the T Down outfit. He hadn't been able to find the right words to thank them. It was getting dusk now

as he and Buck rode along the road. It was Buck who broke the silence.

"If I was a prayin' man, Tom, I'd shore uncork big prayers and little 'uns this evenin'. Them Smales is honest to God real folks."

Tom nodded. Helen Smale's eyes haunted him with their terrible sadness.

CHAPTER SEVEN

No Quarter Asked

IT WAS somewhere around midnight when they neared the Smale ranch. Buck Beeler gave a hoarse shout.

"Look yonder! Fire!"

They spurred to a run. They could see several blazes. Someone was setting fire to the haystacks.

"Don't hesitate to shoot," called Tom, jerking his six-shooter. "It's the Quinlan outfit. Sleeper told Red that he'd sold his hay crop to the T Down. Take to 'em, men. We'll make bunch quitters out of 'em."

They rode hard for the burning haystacks. Now they could see men on foot and on horseback, silhouetted against the firelight. The fire starters heard the T Down men coming. They took to their horses, shooting as they quit the blazing haystacks.

A running fight now, there in the moonlight. Guns spitting fire, men shouting. Some of the Q men, unable to make the gate, hit the barb wire fence. There was a tangle of struggling men and kicking, pawing horses there in the wire and on the ground.

The fight was short, savage, no quarter asked or given. The men who had set fire to those haystacks faced a prison term if caught. They were shooting their way out of a tight while Tom and his men were trying to corral them.

Buck Beeler's gun barrel was hot. He had a wad of natural leaf plug in his mouth and he spat viciously as he filled the empty chambers of his .45 and let out an occasional war whoop. Old Buck was feeling his drinks a little.

"Let 'em have it! Ride 'em down!"

Then, while Buck and some of the cowboys took toll of the wounded men and horses, Tom took the balance of the T Down men to fight fire. With sweaty saddle blankets and slickers, they beat out the flaming kerosene-soaked hay.

Once old Buck caught a glimpse of Mark Quinlan. Mark, cursing his men for quitters, calling them every foul name he could lay tongue to. Mark's face looked bloody on one side.

Daybreak found the fire out. Several stacks were smoldering heaps of ashes. The ranch buildings and corrals had been saved. One of the T Down cowboys was dead. There were four crippled Q men, one of them badly hurt, cut by barb wire, kicked by the shod hoofs of his horse.

Tom located a wounded Q man who would talk. Tom had dressed his wounds and fed him some whiskey.

"Red and Frank stayed in town with some of the boys. Mark took us out here. We was to burn the ranch. Sleeper Smale sold you his hay. The Q outfit will get even with him and you. They got Luther Freeman behind 'em and they got the best lawyer in Montana to back their play any time they get out of order. The Quinlans will get Smale. They'll get you, just like they got your dad, only they'll finish the job. They'll get Buck Beeler."

"Got any cash that says so?" growled old Buck.

"Lost it all backin' Frank Quinlan. Orders was to bet on Frank or get fired. I wish now I'd got fired."

Shortly after sunrise the Smales got home. Tom had sent a man to town for the sheriff and coroner and he had given the news of the fire to the Smales.

Before the sheriff got there, Red and Frank Quinlan and some of their cowboys rode past without stopping. They were traveling at a long trot and their horses looked sweat marked.

"Can't say, Tom," ventured old Buck Beeler, "that they look exactly tickled to death. Red looks like he'd picked a fight with a she-cougar with kittens and Frank ain't so perky. Kind of sorry-lookin' pair of town painters. And only three stacks of hay burned here. Lucky we got pushed out of town, son. We got the Quinlans over a barrel this time. Settin' fire to ranches means the pen."

"We can't get to first base if we take it to court, Buck. They have Freeman's money behind 'em. We can't afford law suits. We have to handle this ourselves. Trials cost money, and money is something we haven't. But we have 'em on the run, just the same."

Tom left some men to guard the Smale place and the hay, then he and Buck and the rest of the crew rode home. They found the Old Man waiting for them. Old Buck let out a war whoop that heralded the good news. There in the dusk of the veranda the Old Man smiled.

IT RAINED for three days and nights. The rain had come too late to make grass but it filled the water holes. The Old Man insisted on putting on his hat and slicker and sitting out on the porch. Old Buck Beeler kept him company. Tom was out with the round-up wagon, gathering beef and feeding them at the Smale place. Never did a crew of cowboys work harder than the T Down hands worked those weeks. Even when the rain bogged down the wagons, they still worked on, gathering beef.

Leaky slickers . . . wet clothes, and sacks of soggy tobacco drying over the round-up stove to the profane but futile protests of the round-up cook. Cold backed horses humped up when cinches were jerked tight before dawn. Cowboys under the charge of Sleeper Smale, shoveled good hay that was putting tallow on the T Down beef.

Tom, during those hard weeks, did the work of a dozen men. No old hand could have done better. He and the bigger part of his men worked the range, delivering the cattle at the Smale ranch. The first trainload of steers topped the market. Buck Beeler had gone to Chicago with the shipment and came back looking twenty years younger. The T Down outfit, thanks to little old Sleeper Smale, was coming out on top.

It was weeks before Tom saw Jane Hunt. He had been too busy to stop at the Smale ranch except to deliver and take away cattle. It was during the heavy rain that he met her, there at the creek crossing. The creek had swollen above the banks, treacherous and more than a little dangerous, especially for a pilgrim. She and Chuck Smale and one of the younger Smales were there in the buckboard on the bank of the creek.

"You can't tackle that creek till it gets down," he told her. "Chuck, we're camped about five miles back on the old round-up trail. You can't miss it. I'll get word to your folks that you're safe."

SO JANE HUNT had spent a couple of days at the T Down wagon. The nighthawk had donated his one man tepee. The cook had shaved and put on a fresh floursack apron. And Jane Hunt had helped him there at the mess tent. Some of the cowboys were shaving. Tom, however, gaunt cheeked, his eyes sunken and bloodshot, did not shave. He treated her casually. When the rain stopped and the sky was blue again, she told Tom she was going back to the Smale ranch.

"I've been in the way here. I'm sorry."

"We've been glad to have you, ma'am.

Sorry the accommodations were not better. But a round-up camp is something different from a mayor's mansion."

"I think," she replied slowly, her face coloring, "that I am beginning to understand. Aren't you being a little absurd?"

"I'm usually wrong," conceded Tom. "Perhaps it's my peculiar way of giving advice to a stranger in a strange land. The cow country around here don't happen to like Luther Freeman and they don't like Freeman's friends."

"When a person needs advice, they usually ask for it."

"That's right," agreed Tom. "It's none of my business. Any more than that barbecue Frank Quinlan is givin' you and the Freeman crowd there at the Q ranch. Lots of folks like the smell of sheep and Injun whiskey. . . . Here's Chuck with the buckboard."

He helped her and Chuck's small sister into the buckboard. Jane's face was a little white. The unshaven cowboy stood there in his soiled overalls and flannel shirt, his battered hat in his hand. There was a grim look to his mouth and his eyes were hard. He was remembering bits of range gossip. Freeman's visits to the Smale ranch, for instance, taking Jane Hunt into town for week-ends. Frank Quinlan's frequent visits to the schoolhouse. And the pinto horse and a saddle Frank had given her. It was said that Ma Smale's smile had lost something of its old happiness and that Helen never went to the dances any more. Tom could not help but hearing this talk. People were saying a lot of things about the new schoolmarm who boarded with the Smales and went to town to spend her Saturdays and Sundays, eating fancy food and having a gay time at the Freeman mansion.

Freeman and the Quinlans hand in glove. Jane Hunt the guest of honor at a barbecue at the Quinlan ranch. They were putting on a rodeo for the guests. Frank Quinlan had sent Tom a challenge to meet him in the contests.

Tom watched the buckboard out of sight, a bitter smile on his lips.

The buckboard went on through the mud, Chuck driving the gentle team. Chuck's little sister dropped off to sleep. Jane Hunt held the youngster in her arms. Tears stung her eyes and she fought back the aching lump in her throat.

AGAIN Tom Tarbell topped the market with a trainload of T Down steers. He paid off Sleeper Smale at the present price for hay and there was enough left over to run the outfit on. The next shipment would bring in enough money to send the Old Man back to a specialist. The T Down outfit was going to do more than merely survive the winter. But that was more than could be said for the nesters. True enough, the rains had come in time to save their crop of winter wheat but before the crops could be harvested their notes would be due at the bank. Luther Freeman would own their crops, their homes. Luther Freeman's greedy hands were at their throats.

The Q outfit planned to put in more sheep, so it was said. And Luther Freeman was buying the woolies, backing the Quinlans. Luther Freeman had a good part of the Q outfit. Red Quinlan was calling the banker-mayor by his first name and slapping him on the back, much to Freeman's distaste. Frank, a frequent visitor at the Freeman home, knew how to mix with the Freeman guests. The ladies fell hard for his goods looks, his swaggering manner, his braggadoccio.

Mark Quinlan, however, stayed away from it all. He was getting more surly every day and was drinking harder. He quarreled with Red and Frank and spent most of his time with the round-up wagon. He cursed his brothers and the Free-

man crowd and the stinking sheep. He drove his round-up crew hard, cursing them, making things as hard as he could for them. There was a keg of whiskey in the mess wagon and the Q paid top wages. The grub was good. Otherwise Mark Quinlan wouldn't have been able to keep a crew of men together. He had put fear in most men who would have taken a shot at him. Mark, drunk or sober, was fast with a gun. And he had made the remark once that if he hated a man bad enough to kill him, and that man was faster with a gun, he'd kill him without giving him an even break.

Mark Quinlan did not attend the barbecue that was to have such an unlooked-for climax. The Q outfit had shipped the day before and Mark was in town, drinking alone, his bloodshot gray eyes clouded with a brooding look. He sat in the corner of a saloon, his gun on the table beside his bottle of whiskey. Most of the Q cowboys had pulled out for the ranch to take part in the barbecue and rodeo.

Towards evening he saddled up and left town, swaying a little as he rode into the dusk.

FEAR showed in the eyes of Luther Freeman as he shook hands with the three bank examiners who had paid him an unexpected call. His poker smile greeted them.

"I'm sorry I won't be here today, gentlemen, but I'm attending a barbecue at the Quinlan ranch. The boys will treat you with every courtesy. You won't need me, anyhow. I expect to return tonight or early tomorrow."

Luther Freeman left the bank and went to the office of the attorney for the Quinlans. He spent half an hour there. When he came out, he was smoking a cigar and something of the fear that had shown in his eyes had disappeared. He got into his buggy and headed for the Smale ranch. Once clear of town, he took a whiskey bottle from behind the cushion and drank. Every few miles he would take another drink. Ordinarily Luther Freeman was not a man who drank beyond an occasional cocktail or glass of wine. The raw whiskey took the tremble out of his hands. He lit a fresh cigar.

The rest of his party had left at daybreak for the Quinlan ranch, some on horseback, others in rigs. Luther Freeman was late. He had to pick up Jane Hunt at the Smale ranch, then cut across to the Q ranch. He took another drink and whipped up the horses. The whiskey, the wind, the thought of Jane Hunt's company helped him forget the three bank examiners who had dropped in on him so unexpectedly.

He picked up Jane and they headed for the Quinlan ranch. He tried several times to kiss her.

"Please, Mr. Freeman, don't. You've been drinking or you would never act like this. You forget you're married."

"Married!" He laughed out of one corner of his mouth. "We're separating next month. I'm letting her get a divorce. Jane, can't you see I'm in love with you?"

"I hardly know you. I'm not in love with you and I wouldn't marry any man I did not love. Please drive on. We'll be late for the rodeo."

"You're afraid you might miss seeing the dashing young Frank Quinlan do his stunts, is that it?" There was an ugly note in his voice.

"Get an eyeful of him today, my dear, because you won't see him doing his act any more there at the Q ranch."

"What do you mean?"

"Little secret, my charming young lady. Just a little surprise. After today we shall be rid of the company of the Quinlans. They will be out of the picture. The unwashed Red will no longer drag his spurs across my waxed floors. The

bragging Lothario Frank will no more sing his songs and tell his colorful tales. He won't be able to give away pinto saddle ponies to his lady friends. He's given away too many now. He gave the last one to you. The one before that to the apple-cheeked Helen Smale. Your name now is undoubtedly added to the long list he keeps in his little red tally book. He is quite proud of that book. Likes to show it to his drinking companions in saloons. Charming chap, Frank. Stick to your own sort of people, my dear. East is east."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Bucking Chute Blood

TOM TARBELL read the message a Q cowboy had brought to the round-up camp. Then he handed it to old Buck Beeler, who had ridden over from the ranch with the mail.

Buck scowled at the brief message. Buck grinned and buckled on his cartridge belt.

"Don't be a bonehead, Tom. You're walkin' into a trap."

"The Quinlans can't call me a coward. I'm goin' to the barbecue and I'm ridin', ropin' and doggin' against Frank Quinlan. I'm leadin' over that big black Pancho Villa bronc and I got a thousand dollars that says Frank can't stay with him five jumps. The Q outfit hasn't a bronc in their remuda that I can't scratch. He can give me the worst snake that wears the Q brand and I'll qualify. You take care of the outfit till I get back, Buck."

"I'm goin' along. Somebody with sense has got to ride herd on you. I got a few six-bits to bet, myself. I'll ketch the horses while you're shavin' and crawlin' into clean clothes."

"I'm not shavin'. The clothes I have on are good enough."

"But there'll be some good lookin' gals there, Tom. That new schoolmarm will be there. How you goin' to beat Frank Quinlan's time if you go over with a week's whiskers and them dirty overalls?"

"It takes more than fancy clothes to ride a salty bronc. I ain't dressin' up for the Freeman pack of snobs."

It was about noon when Tom and Buck, riding their top horses and leading the big black outlaw Pancho Villa, arrived at the Q ranch. There was a big crowd there. Freeman's guests, cowboys, Red and Frank Quinlan. Red was half drunk and in a boisterous, loud-mouthed humor. Frank was doing some rope spinning tricks. Tubs of ice in the shade of the cottonwoods were filled with beer and a bartender in white was mixing drinks at an improvised bar. A fiddle and an accordion played. Luther Freeman drove up in his buggy, Jane beside him. Freeman's wife, a blonde with cold blue eyes and tight-lipped mouth, smiled frigidly.

Frank Quinlan, still spinning his rope, stepped up on his horse. Now the loop flipped out, settling neatly down over Jane's shoulders, tightened. Jane reddened as the crowd cheered and laughed. Luther Freeman, a scowl on his face, reached to take off the rope. Jane stepped down from the carriage, away from the banker's reach. She tried to laugh but she felt sick inside, shaking. She wanted to burst into tears and hide.

"That's the way a cowboy gets his girl, Luther," roared Red, a bottle of whiskey in his hand.

NOBODY had taken notice of Tom and Buck who sat their horses at the edge of the crowd.

"Take 'er easy, Tom," drawled old Buck. "Don't fly off the handle."

Jane had thrown off the rope. Mrs. Freeman handed her a tall frosted drink.

"You look like you needed a bracer, my dear."

Jane's hand trembled as she drank.

She did need something to calm her nerves. Tom swore under his breath.

Now Red spotted Tom and Buck. He swaggered over, waving his bottle. He was grinning widely.

"Well if it ain't the T Down reps. Step down, gents, and join the crowd. Plenty to eat and drink."

"We didn't come here to eat and drink, Red. I came because I got Frank's note saying he knew I didn't have the guts to come here and contest. I don't eat Q beef and I don't drink Freeman's booze. I got a horse here for Frank to tackle. I got a thousand dollars that says he can't ride him five jumps. I'll scratch and fan any horse you want to pick."

"And there's another thousand," said old Buck, "that talks T Down language sayin' Tom rides him straight up with the proper trimmin's."

"I'll take both bets," Red said. "Freeman holds the stakes. Hey, there, Luther, come over here. Tom Tarbell has come over with some bettin' money. We need a stake holder."

"The stake holder won't be Freeman," said Tom grimly. "I'd sooner trust a sheep thief. Yonder comes a man that'll do." He pointed to the sheriff from Rimrock who was riding up with a couple of men.

"Nobody asked him here," growled Red. "He's got two deputies with him, too. Some of your work, Tom?"

"No. Sheriffs have a right to go where they please. Looks like he's here on business." Tom hailed the big peace officer. "You got here just in time to hold stakes, Sheriff. Frank Quinlan and I are contestin'. We need a judge and time keeper that's honest."

"I'm here on business, Tom, but the business can wait for a while."

Frank Quinlan rode up on his top rope horse. He was decked out in fancy cowboy garb such as showmen wear. He sat his horse well and made a handsome picture.

"Brought protection," he sneered at Tom.

"Ask the sheriff if I called on him. I brought over a rockin' horse for you to try out. I'm ridin' any horse you give me. After that I'll rope with you and 'dog with you for love, money or marbles. Let's get goin'."

THERE were two bucking chutes. Both riders came out at the same time. Frank Quinlan on the squealing, wicked pitching Pancho Villa, Tom fanning a big sunburned sorrel that was a sunfisher and limber-legged.

Three jumps and Frank lost a stirrup. The big black bawled and swapped ends. Frank landed in the dirt.

Tom was still on top of the big sorrel. That gave him the money but he knew what was coming. The first jump the big sorrel made he knew what horse he was riding. It was an outlaw called Flapjack, a horse that had a habit of losing his feet and turning over. He had killed one bronc rider and badly injured several more. The bronc was barred from all contests on that account.

Tom rode as loosely as he dared, still scratching, still fanning with his hat. If you loosened up too much, you were piled. If you didn't, you would get caught when those four legs gave way and he piled up.

Tom felt it coming. He jerked his feet from the stirrups just as the big sorrel piled up in a kicking, striking heap. There was a swirl of dust, then blackness.

His eyes blinked open. Somebody was wiping his face with a wet towel. It was hard to see for a second. Then he grinned up at Jane Hunt, who was as white as chalk. She was wiping blood from his ripped scalp with a wet towel. Beside her squatted old Buck. A man in shirt-sleeves

was working with some thin boards and strips of cloth.

"Keep him there on the ground. I'll have that broken arm set in no time."

A broken arm. For Tom, the contest was over. He lay back, grinning up at Jane. She smiled a little.

"Does it hurt terribly, Tom?"

"Not when you're around, ma'am."

Buck poured whiskey down his throat. The doctor, one of the Freeman party, set the arm and put it in splints. The break was below the elbow.

"Looks like we might as well go home," he said to Buck when he was on his feet.

"I want to go with you," said Jane.

"That's a good idea, Tom," said the sheriff, who had come up with his deputies. "There might be a little trouble, and you're in no shape to take a hand. Take the lady with you."

"What's up, Sheriff?"

"Two sets of papers to serve. The bank is closing out the Quinlans and I'm serving them notice. The second is a warrant for Freeman for embezzlement and busting the State banking laws wide open. Red and Frank ain't goin' to take it layin' down. They're . . . God, they're at it! Get the lady away, Tom."

RED QUINLAN had Luther Freeman in his huge, hard hands. He was holding him with one hand, smashing him with his left, cursing him each time he struck. Freeman's face was a smear of blood as his head wobbled sideways. Frank, his fancy clothes soiled from his fall, held off the crowd. There was a terrible grin on his bruised face and he crouched a little.

"Get back, everybody, or I'll commence shootin'. Red is killin' a double-crossin' snake and you're all goin' to watch him do it. You want a show, you white-collared sons. Well, you're gettin' it. Wait till Red breaks his damned back. Stand away, all of you. Freeman robbed us, broke us, but he won't live to tell about it. Break him in two, Red. Give these dudes somethin' to remember. Stand back there or I'll start killin'! Back there, Sheriff, or I'll let you have it!"

The sheriff moved forward, walking at a normal gait. He called out in calm, steady voice.

"Put up your gun, Frank."

Frank's gun roared as he leaped behind the bucking chute. The sheriff spun half way around, shot through the right shoulder. Frank was shooting now at the two deputies who had taken to shelter and were returning the fire.

In his red rage, the fury of a man gone mad with the lust to kill, Frank Quinlan crouched there behind the heavy planks of the chute. He had not seen Tom and Jane, not ten feet behind him. Tom, at the sheriff's warning, had dragged the girl in behind the bucking chutes. Tom made her lie prone in the dust. He crouched there, his body shielding her, his gun in his hand.

Tom leaped. Once, twice his gun barrel thudded against Frank's skull. Frank lay there in the dirt.

Over where the crowd was there rose a cry of horror and the terrible scream of a man. A shot. . . . Another shot. . . .

Now old Buck was there beside Tom. He tied Frank hand and foot.

"Get the lady away from here, Tom. Put her on my horse. I'll ketch up later. Pronto, son. It's all over now but the powder smoke driftin'. Get the lady away."

Half an hour later Buck caught up with them. They rode along in silence for a ways, then Tom spoke.

"Buck, meet the future Mrs. Tom Tarbell. She just promised to marry me. Tenderfoot girls like her need husbands to look after 'em out here."

They left Jane with Mrs. Smale. Jane, weeping now and laughing at the same time, clung to the older woman. Sleeper met Tom and Buck at the barn. He beckoned them inside and produced a jug.

"Heard the news, boys? My oldest 'un, Helen, run off this mornin' and got married to the T Down Swede. He's a good steady man for her. Young and strong and saves his money. What's new with you, gents?"

"Red Quinlan killed Luther Freeman, but Freeman, dyin', shot Red twice and killed him. Frank will hang."

IT WAS dusk when they reached the ranch. The Old Man was sitting in his wheel chair, a carbine across his lap. There was a queer smile on his leathery face.

"What is it?" asked old Buck, who could read the Old Man's every expression. "What in hell you bin up to, anyhow?"

"Mark Quinlan come visitin' today. He come a-shootin'. Before he passed in his checks he told me it was him that had shot me and then left me for dead. Frank was with him. I'd rode up on 'em in the badlands brandin' out some stolen cattle. I had Frank covered. Hadn't sighted Mark savvy? So he let me have it from behind. He said it always had stuck in his mind that he'd ought to finish me. So he rode here to finish me.

"The Swede saw the whole thing. So did his bride. They'd stopped by to tell me they'd got married. The Swede and I packed Mark into the bunk-house. Yep, I had his feet, the Swede his shoulders. No, I ain't drunk. Hold this Winchester, Buck, and I'll show you how the Old Man kin walk. It was a secret between me and the Swede. Over in the old country Swede's father was one of these rubbin' doctors and he teaches his trade to his son. But the boy don't cotton to it much. So when he's nineteen, he runs away from home. When everybody is out of the way around here, Swede goes to work. Now git out of my way and we'll go in and have a drink to the bride and groom."

Buck and Tom watched the Old Man get out of his wheel chair and with a firm, steady stride lead the way into the house. For a moment none of them could speak. Then the Old Man broke the silence.

"You never had me fooled, either of yuh. No man ever had a better pardner or a finer son. I thank Almighty God for yuh both. And for the Swede."

The Old Man filled three glasses. The three clicked them and drank. Then the Old Man noticed Tom's injured arm.

"He busted it," volunteered old Buck, "puttin' it around that little schoolmarm. As long as the bottle ain't corked yet, let's hoist one to Tom Tarbell and the little girl he's goin' to marry."

THE END

DIME WESTERN MAGAZINE

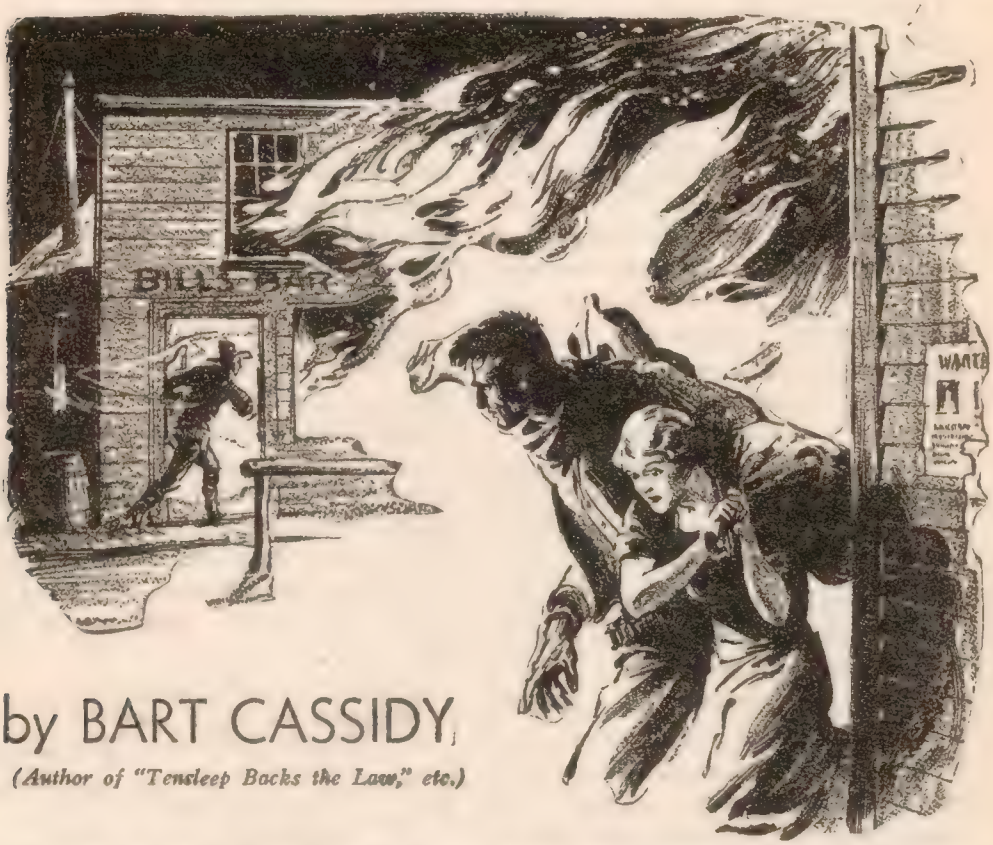
IS NOW PUBLISHED TWICE EACH MONTH!

See page 11 for complete, thrilling line-up of stories in the first great semi-monthly issue!

Watch for the September 15th Issue

For Sale On All Newsstands August 31st!

Tensleep=Calamity Howler



by BART CASSIDY

(Author of "Tensleep Backs the Law," etc.)

There are times—like that hectic night in the hell-roaring town of Calamity —when even a bounty-hunting marshal may forget the price of a horse-thief's head and thank whatever gods there be for the gunskill of such men as Tensleep Maxon!

AFTER a cold night ride through the Uncompagres I drop into the warm foothills. An' does the risin' sun look good! But what looks better are some cowboys workin' cattle, an' a stove-up old cowdog ranglin' dutch ovens at the chuck wagon. It's those dutch ovens that reminds me that Tensleep Maxon, hoss-thief, ain't eaten since he can remember. An' so, bein' that sheriffs' friend myself, I take a chance on bein' recognized and ride in.

That grub-spoiler is a crochetty neighbor an' refuses to dish out a bite until noon when his outfit finishes their gather an' will be in a hungry mood. But fer all his meanness an' cussin', he can't discourage me away from his fire where I hunker an' smoke until the boss lopes in at twelve o'clock.

This boss-man is young an' I like the way he handles hawssflesh. It shows he's grass bred. He's lean, tall, narrow-waisted, with his dusty coat hung over wide shoulders. His face is bold-hewed; his straight nose hints at strength an' his pale blue eyes is sharp an' straight gazin'.

Hearin' me politely cussin' the cook, he grins an' swings down.

"What's the augerment?" he hollers.

"Dishwater, yo're the worst ever I saw fer gettin' folks down on yuh. If it wasn't a waste uh ammunition, I'd advise you to shoot yoreself."

"Cripes, Rockerty," whines the biscuit shooter. "If I gotta feed ever' saddle bum an' grub-liner that hits camp betwixt meals, damn if I don't. . . ."

The cowman laughs, turns to look me over. His glance is keen as a knife edge.

"Howdy," he grins. "You've bin wet; yore eyes is red from lost sleep an' yo're hunger-ga'nted like a work-ox on dry foxtail. I can't understand it!"

"Understand what?" I ask, stiff.

"Why yuh didn't down Dishwater an' take the chuck you needed. It revives his hospitality most amazin' to pole his horns smooth with a gun barrel."

"I taken pity on you, Mister," I grin back. "It's mostly fatal to short-hand an outfit at the dutch ovens."

"Oh . . . ." he shrugs, " . . . . you didn't do us no favor. It's just a question if we die of his cookin' before we git around to cuttin' him loose from his meanness. Here comes the boys now, stranger. Grab a plate an' help yoreself ample."

Heedin' his advice, I'm shovelin' it down an' grinnin' at the glowerin' cook when the cowhands ride in. They're a pore lookin' crew. This outfit must figger that anything in hair pants is a cowpuncher. They swing down, mutter "howde-doos" an' tie into the chuck like grubliners in an unfriendly country.

While eatin', I ketch the boss' eyes on me, searchin'. An' under his smilin' front is thunderheads uh trouble. From what little talk passes, I learn that they're the Rocker T spread an' they're cuttin' out yearlin's to fill a order in the Paradox country.

After eatin', I roll a cigarette an' find a sunny bank to sprawl against. I'm dronin' there, listenin' to the boss direct his men about the drive, when the flutter of hoofbeats rouses me. Lopin' across the flat comes six hawssbackers, a big frog-faced jigger leadin' 'em. Things is mighty quiet in the camp as them riders sweep up an' Frog-face lights down before the Rocker T boss.

"Rockerty Bill," he snarls. "I heard you was cuttin' out cattle so I rid out to cut yore herd. Any objections?"

"None whatever, Mapes," says Rockerty Bill, soft. "I'll send the boys out to help yuh."

"What's the idea, Towles?" rasps Mapes. "You know Association rules. Notify all neighbor outfits before roundin' up. What you tryin' to pull off?"

Rockerty Bill Towles fights back his anger. "This ain't a roundup, Mapes. An' it's on the level. I'm cuttin' out a few of my own yearlin's to sell fer cash money. You or any other man is welcome to . . . ."

"Where you drivin' 'em?"

"Wouldn't you like to know."

"Cocky, eh Towles? Well I'll cure that if there's Heart J stuff in yore gather. Where at you holdin'?"

"On Jackass Flats."

Mapes nods, makes a whirlin' mount. "C'mon, boys. We'll give a look."

As they roar away, Rockerty Bill comes to life. "Foller 'em, men. Watch what they do. But no words an' no trouble!"

THEY jerk cinches on new mounts an' tear after Mapes. Rockerty Bill whirls, searches the camp.

"Dishwater," he hollers. "Where's that stranger?"

"Search me," snarls the cook. "Think I'm hand-nursin' chuck-line bums?"

Rockerty eyes him a second, pullin' his square jaw reflective. Then, flushin', he spots me an' pokes over."

"It's dog eat dog," he says, gloomy. "A carniverous world where vegetable eaters is cut into the canners."

"Try eatin' meat," I suggest.

"Think I'll have to." He snaps me a knowin' look. "You was wet, stranger. Hungry an' ga'nt. Yore hawss is weary but not sweat-streaked. Mebby you come over the mountain."

"Yo're better at guessin' than at pickin' a trail crew," I grin.

He scowls. "Then you did come across the Uncompagres. An' I doubt if Tug Mapes or his men seen you."

"Who's Mapes?"

"Ramrod of the Heart J. Best little six-gun fixer Heart Jackling's got."

"Who's Jackling?"

He eyes me suspicious. Satisfied I'm not joshin', he goes on. "Jackling's the big noise of this range. What he says goes—or else. He's made plenty trouble fer me. . . ." His face clouds. "Seems like there's allus bin trouble here."

"You rod a pore lookin' crew fer a trouble range," I suggest.

"What kin I do?" he asks. "I've had good men but Jackling bluffs 'em away or pays 'em more to ride fer him. All I kin hire are shorthorns . . . . an' damn few of them. Jackling's deviled me till I'm about broke. If I can't deliver these yearlin's, I am broke."

"Devilin' yuh . . . . why?"

"To git my high-grass range. Drouth showed him he needed it to make a shore-thing cattle spread. Offered first to buy it. But . . .," his face goes bitter, ". . . my dad started Rocker T, built it up, passed it to me when he laid down his cards. Him an' my Ma is buried out there. I'll never sell their graves, broke or not." His eyes flick to my belt an' his voice trembles. "You wear a gun. Did it ever do you any good?"

"Did it?" I grin. "It's saved me chuckin' off my immortal soul two-three times. Why? You want me to burn this Jackling down to yore size?"

He shakes his fine head. "Thank God, no. I was thinkin' about you."

"Why me?"

"I'd like to hire you on. Yo're a stranger. A stranger in Calamity lookin' fer a ridin' job, will meet Jackling. It's his town. If you posed, say as a gun-fighter, he might let drop what he aims to do about me an' this calf drive."

I nod thoughtful. "Where does my gun come in?"

He grins. "Just in case Jackling follered you when you fetched me word. He's deadly as a rattler an' slick as a yellow clay hillside in rainy weather. It's a chance you'll be takin'—an' I can't pay what it's worth."

"The fun," I tell him, "may be pay enough. When do I start?"

"Now!" he grins an' grabs my hand fervently. "An' I shore am grateful. Tonight I'll hold them heifers at the river. Yeah, an' tomorrow, if I don't hear from you tonight!"

"If you don't hear by tomorrow," I tell him, "hold 'em another day. I'll git word to yuh somehow."

"You," he asks, searchin', "are—?"

"Me," I lie, thankful he ain't read my brand, "I'm Howler Jones—gunslinger."

MY FIRST glimpse of Calamity in the last rays of the settin' sun ain't inspirin'. Looks like a scatteration of overgrowed packin' boxes ringed with empty cans. But long ago I quit judgin' towns by their looks.

Though Calamity looks dead, a noticin' eye tells a feller no man kin pass between its stragglin' boardwalks an' not be well weighed. Men are planted here an' there with their mouths hangin' open tuh air out their lungs, but with eyes too bright an' glances too careful fer such laziness.

From habit, I head for a feed barn at the end of the street. Like the biggest saloon, the "Cafe," the pool room an' the "General Store," it's got Jackling's name plastered on it. A one-man town is right!

Slouched careless in the saddle, I ride into the barn. From a shadowy hole in the wall comes a man .... or part of one. He's got a bent leg that sways him most amazin'. He's thin as a larkspur-locoed cow. His face is screwed up with somethin' between rheumatic twinge an' universal hate.

"Well," he barks "what yuh want?"

"You kin stall my bronc." I says, "Water an' grain him in about a hour."

"Oh!" he says, thawin' out. "Gunfighter, eh? Well, don't gun me. My game-laig hurts like hell's rough edge. An' ...." Not till then do I notice that he's nothin' but a kid. Young in years but old in pain an' abuse.

"I savvy, son," I tell him, swingin' down an' layin' a sympathetic hand on his bony shoulder. "I wish you felt as good as me. Do all the cussin' you need to salve yore feelin's. An' if any jigger in this corner uh hell don't like it, call on Howler Jones. Ary hotel here without Jackling writ all over it?"

"Nary," he clips, an' looks startled. "Glory, feller, ain't you here to work fer Jackling? Didn't he send fer yuh?"

"Not so's you kin notice it."

"Then ride on through, feller," he pleads, clutchin' my arm. "You look like a good feller an' .... an' it's plain you don't know Calamity. Hawss Fly is only ten mile on. Go there, it's safer ...."

He's so sincere, I leave him before he gits under my hide. Last I see as I look back, he's got an arm around High Ball's neck, whisperin' somethin' in his ear. His eyes, deep troubled, is follerin' me. I grin at him, walk over to the hotel. At the pine-board desk, a coyote-smirkin' clerk hands me a pen. I scribble ....

"Howler Jones, Gunville."

"Room six, upstairs," he hums. "Three dollars in advance."

"Nice town," I chuckle, an' start upstairs. The clerk spins the register, studies the name, then flings a wild-eyed stare after me. Which gives me a belly laugh.

AFTER washin' up, I come down to the street, enter the restaurant an' take a seat. Customers is thinnin' out. A girl hash-slinger, lightin' the lamps, wiggles out a match an' comes over to take my order. She sings the same hash-house song but in a different key. As I grin an' tell her how I want that piece uh cow fried, her clear grey eyes is on me with absent-minded interest, like she'd rather talk about dances or a hawssback ride under the stars. She looks starved for pleasure. But she holds herself with a tight rein, repeats the order an' turns away to deliver it. An' I find pleasure in watching the free rhythm of her strong young body.

Several times, as I gallop through my steak, I ketch her eyes on me, with somethin' in them I can't read—longin', sadness, somethin' that ortn't be in a young gal's eyes. When I'm finished, I wave a greenback at her an' she comes over.

"Part uh this is for the meal," I tell her. "Use the rest to buy somethin' for the dance. . . ."

A bitter smile edges her lips. "The only dances in Calamity are in the saloon. No decent girl would go there."

"Why don't you quit Calamity?" I ask her. "What's a nice gal like you doin' in a town like this?"

"It's Bud," she confesses. "My brother. He works at the stable. He has a spinal ailment that needs an operation. He can't get work most places, but he can here because Jackling. . . ."

She stops, blushin'. I savvy, an' it makes my hackles rise. "I get it," I tell her, harsh. "He puts you both to work at his own price, figgerin' to build up to a gal he ain't fit to look at, let alone. . . ."

She lays soft fingers on my lips. "Sh-h-h-h!" she cautions. "It's not my choice

. . . or Bud's. But it's money for the operation. Here comes Jackling!"

She palms the bill, smilin' kinda pitiful, gathers up the plates an' walks to'rds the kitchen. I pick up my hat, turn to the door where three men are enterin'. It's no trick to pick Jackling. He's in the lead, where the Jacklings of this world insist on bein'. He's big without bein' huge; deliberate movin' without a hint of sluggishness. His glitterin' black eyes an' fixed smile both scream danger.

I walk right up to him, noddin' cold, an' make as if to pass. But he makes no move from the doorway. His eyes, swellin' with challenge, look me up an' down.

"Howler Jones, eh?" he says. "From Gunville."

"The curly wolf in person," I grin.

"Le's hear yuh howl, feller."

"It ain't my night, Jackling. But keep yore ears washed clean an' you'll likely hear me."

"Humph. Where is this Gunville that whelped yuh?"

"Wherever a man's trigger finger gets itchy," I tell him, pointed. "Why? Was you aimin' to stir it up?"

He gives me another appraisin' look, his belly shakin' with soundless laughter. The two slit-eyed gunmen at his elbows are grinnin' broad, as if it's a joke.

"Jones, eh?" chuckles Jackling. "I once knowed a Jones in Nevada. A fast trigger sheriff, he was. But not fast enough, accordin' to the coroner's jury. You got any kinfolks in Nevada?"

"She's a wide state, Jackling," I grin. "With a heap more sand than some of her sheriffs. If I got kinfolks there, they're dead."

He starts, his grin fadin'. "That calls fer a drink," he says, sober. "I think me an' you, we'll work together harmonious."

He leads the way out. An' as I foller him an' his gunmen, I look back at the waitress. She's standin' in the kitchen door, her gracefulness gone. She's stiff an' straight, her fingers grippin' the jamb. An' in her eyes is what no woman's eyes should ever show—fear. . . .

CALAMITY CORNER, Jackling's pride is no different from a thousand saloon-gambling establishments I've bin in. The place is a blaze of yellow light reflected from crystal chandeliers an' big mirrors. The bar is long an' well-lined. Across from the counter is two rows uh tables an' the choice of most every known way uh losin' money fast. Even though a feller knows it fer a spider web, such a place warms his heart when he's bin alone for a spell. The lights, the hum of voices, the rattle of glasses. The warm friendliness that ain't real. The driftin' smoke, rattle of chips, dronin' dealers an' bangin' rhythm of an off-tune piano.

I'm feastin' eyes an' ears as I walk to the bar with Heart Jackling, his two gunmen layin' back an' minglin' with the crowd. Jackling crooks his finger at the bartender.

"My private bottle, Pete."

The man is settin' it out with glasses before I shift my glance. An' I reckon my face shows, fer once, that I'm ketched short. The feller's eyes are on me but his gaunt face is a mask. Whee-ew! He's Ogallala Frayne, undercover man for the U. S. Marshal's office, a hawk-smart, man-trackin' fool. I'd like a dollar for ever' mile he's chased me fer . . . well, never mind what.

Frayne's face shows no flicker uh recognition, except mebby a grim smile at my surprise. He turns away an' Heart Jackling is pourin'.

"Well, Howler," he smiles, liftin' his glass. "Here's to slower lawmen an' handier state lines."

"An' bullet-proof hides," I add, tossin' it off. What I'd like to have told him is that the law hounds of Uncle Sam don't

give a hoot fer state lines, especially Ogallala.

"Good likker, ain't it, son? Well, drink a lot of it. Pete'll take care uh you. I've gotta go see a horse about a man. But I'll be back. Don't go away."

I watch him swagger through the crowd, stop at the far wall to talk to a hatchet-faced man. An' that man, though he's slicked up, ain't nobody but Dishwater—Rockerty Bill's cook. Cripes! What's he doin' meetin' up with Jackling, Towles' sworn enemy? I'm standin' there puzzlin' about that an' watchin' them two leave the place, when I hear a chuckle in my ear. Ogallala is grinnin' at me, wipin' off the bar, talkin' outa the side of his mouth.

"Howler Jones, eh?" he chuckles. "Just one of Mister Jones' big boys."

"Ma Jones' favorite son," I correct him. "How's tricks, Ogall. . . ."

"Sh-h-h-h," he breaks in. "I'm Pete, the baby of the Smith family."

"Slip yore picket pin, Pete?"

"Call it that. I've made you some trouble, feller, that I reckon you'd like to even up. Which same you can by yodelin' that name you jest clipped off."

"I've forgot what it was, Pete." I grin.

He nods, serious. "You won't lose by tight-reinin' yore tongue."

"Talk on, Pete. You interest me."

He tends a customer or two, then comes back. "Jones," he says, "when I'm fishin' fer game fish, I'm blind to minnies. An' a thousand dollar hawss-thief is shore a minnie right now."

I grin. "Mebbyso, Pete. But knowin' yore appetite like I do, even a minnie aint' safe after you've digested yore game fish."

"I swear," he says, fervent, "I ain't seen you in two years."

"Sh!" I warn. Another barkeeper, swipin' off the counter, has jerked his head to look at Ogallala, then snapped it away again. How much has he heard? It's amazin' how sometimes even a whisper will stand out like a scream in a buzzin' bar-room. Ogallala don't even turn his head, seemin' aware when the other bartender has slid away.

"He hear me?" he asks, stiff.

"Search me, Pete. Acted like it."

"Sooner or later they'll peg me, Jones. I was hopin' it wouldn't be till I found what I was after. One marshal has died here an' these coyotes won't stop at another. Will you play my game?"

"No further than keepin' quiet, Pete."

"That's ample. I'll chalk it to yore credit, Jones, if . . . if I come through."

HE moves away. I pour a drink, watchin' that other bartender. If he knows anything, he shore masks it under a calm face. I'm still there, sippin' a drink I don't want when Jackling comes back.

"All right, Howler," he grins. "I done finished my business with that hawss. How's for a little wau-wau? Jest a friendly little talk in my office?"

"Shore!" I grin.

He chuckles, leadin' the way.

In Jackling's office, with a good cigar between my teeth, I wait for him to break the balls.

"Howler," he grins, watching his cigar-smoke. "Yo're my kind of a man. I've read yore cards. They're aces. I like to play 'em."

"Yo're good," I compliment him. "I can't read yore hand, but I notice that yo're stoop shouldered from carryin' the kind uh money I like to spend."

"Fair exchange ain't robbery! I pay a hundred . . . an' ca'tridges. Punchin' cows."

"Whose cows?"

He shakes with laughter. "In this case they happen to be Rockerty Bill Towles' Rocker T critters. Ever hear of him?"

"I've heard he needs hands."

Jackling scowls, rolls his cigar in his mouth. "Jones," he says at last, "I heard you was out to the Rocker T camp an' hope you didn't deal. 'Cause, just between us, Towles ain't liable to be needin' hands . . . after tonight." He rises, glarin' stern. "How about yuh?"

I stand up an' face him. "Suppose I don't care to play yore game?"

"You'll play hell fer a stampin' ground if yuh don't." He reaches over, flips back my coat. "Where do you wear it, Jones? On yore red flannels?"

I laugh at him. "Collectin' stars?" I josh him. "Take a good look. Yo're nervous, Jackling. I know sheriffs that'd git a holler out of lookin' Howler Jones over fer a tin badge."

"Well," he raps, "don't say I didn't give you yore chance. How about yuh?"

"Let yuh know in the mornin'!"

"You'll have tuh move tonight!"

"That gives me till daylight!" I tell him, an' walk into the barroom.

SOMEHOW the warm glow of the place is missin' now an' I walk right on through, ketchin' Ogallala's eyes on me as I pass the bar. Trouble is in the air like the smell of a skunk. Outside, I fill my lungs with the night air, throw my face to the stars an' walk out into the crowdin' sagebrush, my spirit kinda bogged down with bedevilin' thoughts.

The wisest thing I've heard since I hit town is Limpy's advice to hit fer Hawss Fly, ten miles further on. But I've been hearin' that "ride-out" stuff since before I was old enough to wear ears an' it allus has stirred me mule-headed. Besides, there's the unwrote law of the range that sorta gits under a feller's skin. When yuh sign on with a spread, its fights is yores. Meat, bones an' hair goes with the hide. An' I'm workin' fer Rockerty Bill Towles, who's shore to be needin' help.

Then there's that waitress. Thoughts of her an' what she's up against with Heart Jackling, makes me mad all over. With nobody to look after her but a weakly, crippled kid they'd smash like a mosquito when the time comes. It's none uh my horn-in, that's shore, but if some big strong feller, with iron in his veins as well as his holster, don't make it his business, that girl will—

Thinkin' thataway, I rattle my spurs across the prairie. For how long, I can't even guess. But when I snap out of it an' look back, the lights of Calamity shine dim, way off yonder.

I walk slow returnin', doin' some more heavy thinkin' that takes my mind off my gallin' boots. Time I hit town again, I've made up my mind to fork High Ball to the Rocker T trail camp to warn Rockerty Bill Towles. When I hit the stable, I can't raise nobody. A smoky lamp burns in a little cubby office, but Limpy's gone. So I head for High Ball's stall. He's gone too—likewise his fancy riggin'. That's a facer. I'm standin' in the dark stall, wonderin', when I hear voices. Two men walk into the stable, stand before the lighted door of the stable office. One of 'em is Tug Mapes. The other is a Jackling bodyguard.

"He ain't here," growls Mapes. "Do you reckon that Limpy devil's gone an. . . ."

"Shore looks like it," says the other. "The clerk seen him goin' upstairs in the hotel. Shore . . . the rat went up there an' tipped the dick off, I tell yuh, an' the sooner we. . . ."

"Shut up an' come on," snarls Mapes. "Howler's around here somewhere's. He won't drag it without his top hawss an' prize saddle. Le's root him out. You take that side an' I'll take this. If yuh spot him, shoot first an' ask questions afterward. . . ."

WHEE-EW! I coulda spit on either of 'em as they passed. An' both of 'em with hands on their guns. When their footsteps die away on the walk, I go to the stable door. They're way up the street, coyotein' along in the shadows, so I walk across toward the hotel. I'm still in the shadow of the barn when I hear a mournful owl-hoot. There's something the matter with that owl. He's hoarse or somethin.' When it's answered from the creek timber a second later I know there's at least two fellers worse at imitatin' an owl than me. Now a man darts out from between two buildings an' slips into the hotel. It's Ogallala Frayne. He's in a hurry.

I foller Ogallala into the hotel in time to hear him slam his door upstairs. The clerk's standin' stiff behind the desk, his eyes wide an' scairt. Seein' me, don't calm him down none. But he don't make no threatenin' moves, an' I go upstairs. Enterin' my room, I start throwin' my plunder into a saddle roll. There's a sound under the bed. I jerk my gun.

"Come out, feller!" I snort. "Or I'm smokin' you up a batch!"

"Howler!" Limpy's voice comes from under the bed, chatterin' with fright. "Gosh, where yuh bin? I've hid here two-three hours. Nearly got caught by Tug Mapes for comin' here to warn yuh."

"Warn me uh what?"

"Thisaway. I was in the barn when Mapes come from the Heart J. Him an' Jackling talk. Jackling says he's sent a gun crew out to the Rocker T herd with wipeout orders. Jacklin's worried. He tells Mapes things ain't so good in town. Says you an' Pete Smith, one of his bartenders, is both dicks tryin' to hang the killin' of a U. S. marshal around his neck. Lissen. . . ." he clutches my arm, ". . . I hear him gives Mapes orders to kill you both. So I slip up here to let yuh know. An' . . . an' when Mapes busts in here, I go under the bed. I hear him tell another gunman the place is empty. Now . . . if I go down, they'll kill me."

"Then don't," I tell him. "Stay right here. I'll go down an' hitch a span uh wagon ponies for you an' yore sister. Then, if I kin find my red hawss. . . ."

"I know where he is," whispers Limpy. "While waitin' here wonderin' how to git out, I seen 'em ride him outa the barn. He's tied to the rack near Calamity Corner. An' they'll watch that bronc . . . over their sights."

I pat his shoulder. "Thanks, kid. You lay low till I git back." I feel him tremble under my hand, an' pity floods me. If there's a ghost of a show, I'll. . . .

THE clerk's not at his desk, likely bein' gone with word uh my return. So I go out back. Sneakin' along the side, I look around the corner, just as Mapes an' one other stride into the hotel. I say a little prayer for Limpy as I sprint to the stable. It only takes minutes to hitch a span uh hawsses to a buckboard, which I tie, ready to go. Then with a saddle rope, I cross the street, find the rear of the hotel an' go inside.

I'm crouched in the shadow of the staircase when Mapes an' his gun pard come clumpin' down, snakin' the scairt kid between 'em. I shake out a loop an' wait. As they step to the main floor, I flip the rope, layin' it over the three of 'em pretty. Jerkin' it tight, I whip out my gun an' cover 'em.

Mapes, mad as a dog-deviled badger, forces his right arm free an' jerks his smokepole. It looks like gunplay that'll draw down the lightnin' on me. But Limpy crimps that, grabbin' Mapes' arm, an' sinkin' his teeth in it. I clip off the killer's beller by dentin' his thick skull with my gunsight. In about a minute, me an' Limpy has tied up that pair, gagged

'em with their neck scarfs an' dragged 'em into the back room. As I take another look in the lobby, the front door opens an' Rockerty Bill Towles walks in.

The Rocker T boss is walkin' shaky. His hat is gone an' a bloody bandanna is wrapped around his head. But his jaw is juttin' out as he fondles a six-shooter an' looks nervously behind him. When he sees me, he stops short. A scornful little smile twists his wide mouth.

"I . . . I expected more from you," he says, accusin'.

"Don't never expect nothin' of a cottontail that wanders into the wolf den, Rockerty," I grin, sheepish. "Things is buildin' up pretty tight hereabouts. What's the story?"

"They hopped us just a mite after dark, stampeded the yearlin's, killed one of my men an'. . . ."

"What about the rest of yore hawss-an'-rope shorthorns?" I ask, eager.

He shakes his head. "Last I see of 'em," he says, sad, "they was burnin' up grass savin' their skins. I come on in to find you an' run into a snuffy neighbor that I have to lay out with the muzzle of Ol' Meat-in-the-Pot. Lissen . . . somebody comin' now. . . ."

"Upstairs with yuh," Towles."

We take them stairs three at a time, sprint down the hall an' duck into my room. Limpy is right with us, all bogged down with Mapes' pearl handled .45's.

"Tuh hell with this," mutters Rockerty Bill. "Le's git out there an' meet 'em comin' up. I'm of a temper to auger this out with Jackling . . ."

"Wait!" I order. "This ain't no two-man game. There's hands anted into this jackpot that you don't know nothin' about. Hands that may drag down the important chips. Take a dally on yore impatience an' wait."

The stairs creak, boots shuffle along the hall. Then a silence falls that's harder to bear than smoky fightin'. Limpy is crazy with fear an' excitement, but I ain't worried about him. Them boogery kind are deadly as rattlers in a tight.

Now, through the window, comes sounds of men circlin' the hotel on the ground. It's shorely a smoky mess they're stirrin' up. Down the hall a knob rattles. Men come surgin' at our door, but it holds. Over the noise they make, a gunshot rocks the hotel. A man cries, harsh, babblin', liftin' in a string uh horribly meanin'less words.

Again Jackling's gunnies smash ag'in' our door. An' again it holds 'em. I drag down a deep breath, slam a shot through the panel. Now's the time . . . if ever.

"On yore toes, boys!" I yelp. "Here we go!"

I JERK open the door, step into the hall blackness. Purple muzzle flames dance in my face an' the pungent, acrid fumes uh powder flood my nostrils. An easy mark, I should uh bin, but somehow it's a clean miss. I rock the hammer, hear the slug strike. A man coughs, falls away. At my elbows, Rockerty Bill an' Limpy are shuckin' lead as we move straight down the hall. Men are runnin' before us, dark ag'in' the glow from below. An' men are fallin'.

"Powder River!" I beller.

"A mile wide an' a inch deep!" comes the roar from the stair end of the hall.

"You in the clear, Ogallala?"

"Good work, Tensleep!" hollers the U. S. marshal. "Hold onto yore fire. Them that ain't out is down . . . the stairs. An' what they're runnin' into won't hurt 'em . . . much!"

Things git quiet . . . inside. But outside is hell let loose . . . yellin', shootin', the tromp of hoofs! I leap for the stairs, follerin' Ogallala down. Rockerty Bill an' Limpy, both hollerin' like Injuns, come pilin' after me. We hit the street. Jack-

ling's hirelings is backin' up the street, their short guns yammerin' hysterical defiance. Pressin' 'em hard is a posse of reckless-shootin' men. Ogallala's men.

An' suddenly a pale light spreads over Calamity. From four corners, flame licks at the bone-dry buildings. Whoever has planned this has shore planned it thorough. Ogallala ain't fixin' tuh have no more marshals disappear in this hell-town. Things light up fast as flames spread in the stiff breeze. The light forces the Jackling hellions into the buildin' where fire won't let 'em stay long, if I'm a judge.

I turn to Limpy. "Run to the stable, kid, an' take the lines uh that buckboard. I'll fetch yore sister."

Then I run fer the cafe, that'll soon be in danger uh burnin'. As I pop in the front door, she looks up, her face white but her mouth determined as she draws the strings of her flour-sack duffle bag. When she sees who it is, she straightens, throws the sack across her shoulder with a quick, strong movement. Lookin' at me with such a fervor as I never saw in a woman's eyes before; her body tense with emotion, color flamin' in her cheeks.

"I knew from the first," she says, soft, "that you didn't just happen here. This is your work."

"Partly, Miss," I admit. "But there ain't time to talk about that. These board shacks is doomed. In two hours this town will be ash."

"Good riddance," she says, fierce, then her face softens an' grows sad. "It'll cost Bud his operation. But if God can clean out a hole like this, he can provide. . . ."

"I can't speak for God, ma'am," I say, serious, "but I've bin thinkin' some about the kid. Mebby, someway, I can help you with that operation. If . . . if I was to know where you was."

"Would you come," she asks, gentle, "if I was to tell you?"

I look into her eyes an' what I see is temptin' . . . an' excitin'. She seems in that moment to be offerin' herself on the altar of admiration. I'm gettin' the full force of that offerin' an', for the first time in my life mebby, I realize my unworthiness.

Women folks hasn't really entered my life, serious. I like 'em an I've really respected 'em, even the dance-hall gals that ain't near as bad as the men that victimized 'em. The thought now of belongin' to one woman scares me bad.

"Would yuh?" she repeats.

"I think now that I would, ma'am," I tell her. "But the most I kin promise is to come if I feel I kin help you an' Limpy. Where'll you be?"

"Montrose!" she smiles. "I'll go to Montrose an' try to find something to do. If you can come . . . I'll be waiting."

"Shake," I grin, an' we do. "C'mon now," I git down to business as the roar of the fire comes plain. "I gotta get you to the barn. Limpy's waltin' with a buckboard."

We hurry to the door. As we hit the sidewalk, my eyes flick along the street. Gunfire has moved over into the crick bottom an' is peterin' out. As my glance takes in the front of the Calamity Corner Saloon, I see a man dart into the high light of the fire lickin' at the big building. For a moment he's in plain sight as the smoke swirls apart. Then he's gone . . . inside. It's Jackling. An' I think I know what he's after.

"Lissen, lady," I tell the girl. "You hop on down to the barn. I've got a deal on the table."

"Wait!" she begs, an' her fingers slide off my coat as I tear away. I don't look back. I'm scairt I'll weaken if I do.

ASIDE from the buzz an' crackle of flames, the inside of the Calamity Corner is spooky quiet. All the lamps are lit, just as business quit it. The tables are strewn with cards an' chips. Bottles

an' glasses are on the bar. There ain't a soul in sight. But the door to Jackling's office is ajar. As I start to'rds it, Jackling hisself comes out. In each hand is a canvas specie bag that must be mighty heavy from the way they sag his shoulders. At sight uh me, he halts. Not a sound comes out of him.

"Look fer the honey an' find the bee," I sneer at him. "Even yore high-power gun-hirelin's had more sense than to come back here, Jackling."

His lids droop slightly, half curtainin' the frigid slaty grey of his eyes. The two bags drop from his fingers with a metallic clink an' he settles himself.

"Not sense, Jones. Cowardice is the word. It's taught me that a man's no bigger than the weight he packs in his holsters. I played you to come in. When you didn't, I knowed it was me an' you for it."

"You pegged me a lawman," I said.

"No," he denies. "I only used that to egg the boys on. I knowed you were dangerous as a grizzly; I knowed you were here to square fer that Nevada sheriff, Winnemucca Jones."

I smile, never havin' heard of no such lawman. "What do you know about him?"

"I killed him," he grins, savage, his hands curlin' over his guns. "I don't mind tellin' a man that wont' live to pass it on. Why don't yuh slap leather?"

"I aim to give you the break," I taunt.

He flames like the town he had bossed was flamin'. His hands plummet downward. I laugh as I do the fall-way an' slip-cock draw, shuckin' three fast shots. I know he's hit, but it looks like the old scratch itself as his guns flash out an' up, his glass-hard eyes bearin' along the barrels. There's even a hint of a smile as he turns his death-tubes loose. But the lead is wild. Fire dies outa his eyes. Then he's sprawled . . . face down.

NOW the fire busts through the side of Calamity Corner. I dart to Jackling's side, lift them two bags. They're heavy an' no mistake. In ten jumps, I'm outside in the cooler air. Men are crowdin' up the street, men who walk in the open. Rockerty Bill Towles comes rearin' up.

"That you shootin' in the Corner?"

I nod. "Just pulled off a deal with the feller that stole yore beef," I grin. "He settled fer cash an' agreed to quit the range. Here, you take it."

I force one uh them bags into his hands an' sprint for my High Ball pony, jerkin' an' fightin' the rope at the rack. I untie him, swing into leather. I fling a look behind me. The marshal's posse is ridin' slowly into the glare of the fire. Leadin' 'em is Ogallala Frayne. The old panic hits my spurs. Yuh see, I happen to know that feller's appetite. He's downed his fish an' now he'll begin to crave minnies. I kin tell to the minute just how long it's safe fer me in Calamity. An' that minute's plumb arrived. I kick High Ball in the flank an' he tears down that flame-licked street, follerin' the dust of a fast-travelin' buckboard.

It don't take me long to ketch up with that rig. In the glow of the fire, I kin see gladness bloom in the girl's face. Sweepin' up alongside, I heave in that sack of Jackling's gold.

"There's the operation, kids," I holler. "I'll see you in Montrose."

An' without waitin' fer their thanks, I take out through the rustlin' sage, knowin' before the words are hardly outa my mouth that it ain't in the cards. So once again, I'm a lone rider makin' fast tracks in the starlight. . . .

TENSLEEP RIDES AGAIN

In the September 15th Issue . . . Out August 31st!

by HARRY F. OLMSTED
(Author of "Gallows Road," etc.)

GUNS FOR

Pete Demoree, imprisoned years before for a range crime he'd never committed, finds queer solace for wasted years in the grinning, fighting courage of a youngster he might have hated!

HE MIGHT have been a saddle bum or a range rider from some remote line camp, that horseman who rode into Palomas with the last rays of the setting sun on his back. When he swung down to the ground, slipped the rig from his alkali-coated pony and turned it into the pen to cool before watering, he seemed taller than he'd been in the saddle. There was six feet of him—maybe more—six feet of wiry, desert-parched bone and muscle. He was straight-nosed, and his wide slash mouth was rimmed with black, curly whiskers.

A YEARLING

Thrilling Novelette of men who travel the gun-trails

That mouth was grinning and his gray eyes were eagerly intent as he bowlegged along the main street. The citizenry were lolling along the edge of the boardwalk, on benches before the buildings, in seats at windows and doors, all anxious for the first evening relief from the day's burning heat. There were cowmen, merchants, punchers, booted and spurred. An old stage driver was popping his long whip for the town kids. Coatless tinhorns idly contemplated their cigar ends, impatient for darkness and a revival of trade. Ladies—good, bad and imponderable.

The stranger chuckled within his beard. Half of these folks he could call by name. But not a one of the desultory glances flung his way reflected recognition. That rated a laugh. Men come and men go. But time, that incomparable leveler, dulls the edge of human memory, tempers the hates and fears that torment men's souls.

The bearded stranger rattled his spurs into the Cave Saloon, cut the alkali from

his throat with a drink, then angled across the street to the Dove Restaurant—after the Spanish word Palomas—Tony Sansoni, proprietor.

It was before the supper hour. The place was empty save for the dark, smiling owner, and the cook rattling pans behind the partition. As the stranger took a stool at the short counter, Tony regaled him with the stock recital. . . .

The bearded man checked him. "Forgot my regular order, have yuh?"

The restauranteur started, scowled. "Wot you talk, eh?"

"Don't peg me, eh, Tony?"

The man peered, puzzled. But now his eyes widened. His breath sucked.

"Pete!" he laughed softly, wiped a greasy hand on his apron and stuck it across the counter. "Pete Demaree! You weara de beard, Pete. She changa you lak hell. You no looka lak Pete Demaree; you looka lak one beeg, bad feller."

Pete shook hands soberly. "If I fooled you, Tony," he chuckled, "it's no sign I'll fool gents more used to peerin' through the brush."

Tony wagged his head. "Wot you talk, hey? You foola dem all. Dey see you come along, dey say, *'quidado!* Look out! Here comes one beeg, strong feller.' An' . . . poof, dey run away. Dere ees nothing left, my friend, of the Pete Demaree who. . . ."

". . . went away to Yuma for ten years," finished Pete, bitterly. "Well, Tony, the years rob a man of things. My stomach feels like I'd bin robbed of regular eating. Fetch me one of yore saddle-leather steaks, dishwater coffee, soggy sourdough bread an' peach pie you've robbed the juice off to make wine. . . ."

Tony laughed, wrinkled his nose at Pete, hurried to his kitchen. After giving the order, he came back with knife, fork, plate and cup.

"Santa Maria," he chuckled. "It's good you are back, Pete, I tella you wot. Lak old time, no? How long you bin away, Pete? Twelve years?"

"Nearly fifteen, Tony."

"Whee-ew! Longa time, fifteen years. Your friends, Pete, they'll be glad."

"Friends?" Pete lifted his head. "What friends?"

THERE was something in that challenge that held Tony mute. He shrugged, served the meal and sat down to watch his guest eat. When Pete had finished and washed the last crumb down with the dregs from his cup, Tony ventured a half-fearful query:

"You come back to Palomas?" he asked, "to . . . to stay, Pete?"

The bearded man with the puckered grey eyes spun a dollar across the board, shook his head.

"Thank God no, Tony. I'm follerin' the rodeos. On my way to the Socorro show right now. Stopped here just out of curiosity. Funny too . . . Palomas give me plenty to remember it by."

Tony shook his head sadly. "Best that you forget it," he murmured. "We have. Palomas people will welcome you back."

"All of them?" Pete's eyes danced.

Tony blinked. "Most people, Pete. Most people. I talka to dem. I tell dem Pete Demaree got framed. I tell dem that. At first dey laugh. Den dey believe. Wot looka lak evidence then looka fishy now. Dem two Mexicans that swear you into prison, Pete, dey both get murdered inside a year. Shot from the brush. Dead men no tella no tales, you understand. Navajo Purcell, who swear out the complaint fer stealin' his cattle, he buy your ranch in fer taxes, more'n ten years ago. He snatch up all the small places mostly. You remember Raddon Robbins? He holda the mortgage on yore father's ranch? Him an' Robbins are thicker'n thiefs. Own this country, body an' soul!"

His face contorted. "I wouldn't blame you, Peter, for . . ."

Pete shook his head. "Nothin' doin', Tony. First year I was in that hot hell in Yuma, I honed to soil my hands with their blood. But a feller gets to think up there. An' thinkin' right, Tony, fetches peace to the soul. They've lived their lives an' they'll answer fer their crimes, here or hereafter. But I'm damned if I stoke any crazy fires uh vengeance. Nope, I'm ridin' east, then north. Socorro, Prescott, Denver. Cheyenne, Pendleton, Miles City an' Calgary. I can top anything with hair, Tony, an' make more money doin' it than tryin' to buck Purcell an' Robbins. Don't mention my bein' here, will yuh Tony?"

"Tony no maka de talk, Pete."

They shook hands and Pete walked out, his swift lithe stride, his eager gray eyes belying the years implied by the beard. The sun had gone down. Bulbats dipped and circled over the town. Quail thundered into the roosting mesquites in the Palomas Creek bosky. The day's heat was slowly dissipating. From the bottomland came the pungent smell of moist earth and aromatic growing things.

PETE'S eyes ran the length of the street, came to rest upon a man rocking under the wooden awning of a false fronted building, fanning his florid face with a palm-leaf fan. On the front, in faded letters, was the intelligence that here might be found:

Cassius S. Kells
Attorney and Counsellor-at-Law
Notary Public

Old Judge Kells. . . . Pete grinned into his beard. The judge, looking no different for all of the added years, was still rocking in the same rawhide-bottomed chair and stirring the air with the same palm fan. Didn't look, slumped there, like he owned an ounce of badger blood. But, his middle name was fight. He had proved it in Pete's hopeless trial when Judge Kells had battled for every inch, stopping only when every legal strategy had failed.

Seeing that caustic-tongued lawyer again, took Pete back to his childhood when he had ridden into town with his father and listened while the two men talked of trespass, of injunctions, of criminal actions, all concerning the persecutions of Navajo Purcell and the dominating P Dart. Old memories came flashing back. Pete recalled the time Judge Kells had bought candy for him and Sally Bender and had told them that he wanted to dance at their wedding. It had been embarrassing then, but later they had planned it thataway. But trouble had stalked upon the scene; Pete had been convicted and sentenced for cattle rustling; Sally had failed to visit him in jail, or to answer his letters. A fair-weather sweetheart. Still . . . .

Veins rioting with strange excitement, Pete sauntered along the boardwalk, secure in the changes the years had wrought. At the lawyer's grunted "Howdy," Pete returned a curt, "Nice evenin'!" moved to the edge of the boardwalk, sat down and leaned restfully against an awning support. Studying the coal of his cigarette, he stole covert glances at the calm colorless man with the queer goatee—The thinker who rocked and fanned . . . .

PETE followed the judge's gaze. Yonder, in the grassy bottomlands, a red bull pawed dirt, bellowed defiance at three aspiring youngsters of his kind. Now the bigger bull charged. One of the younger bulls turned tail, scampering away. Swiftly the other two took in on the herd leader's tail. But that battle-scarred veteran whirled to meet them, made one stiff-legged charge, sent them ringing their tails in full retreat.

"Bulls," murmured Pete, "are funny critters."

"Like men," grunted the lawyer.

"How's that?"

"Well . . . ." Cassius Kells smiled, ". . . . yon red bull only needs so much grass. Yet it hurts him most amazin' tuh see them little fellers fillin' their bellies. We've got a two-legged bull here that runs off little fellers just that way. An' for the same reason. I mind the first one he run off. I was here to see it . . . ."

"The only difference bein'," argued Pete, "that them young bulls will whoop back fer more. The two-legged one knows when he's got enough."

Judge Kells shook his head. "That's debatable, my friend. I predict the two-legged one will come back too."

"Why should he?"

"Same reason yonder young bulls come back. Not range, or grass to fill the belly—east, west, north and south, the range is as good. Likewise the grass. But there's the soft-eyed heifer to be considered. Bulls, my friend, have a way of returning to their interrupted squiring."

Peter started, shot another look at the judge. Beyond that flashing fan, the man's face was a mask.

"Behind a heifer's soft eyes," Pete said, bitterly, "there's a forgetfulness, hardness of heart that a bull can't understand. No wise bull comes back to the branding fire to be twice burned."

"Behind the heifer's soft eyes," countered the older man, "is the frailty of its kind, the inability to order its conduct and its destiny, as can the bull. Pete, you damn young fool, don't you think I can see past the curl of a man's whiskers? Did you hope to parade before Cassius S. Kells and laugh at his failing eyesight?"

Their eyes met, Pete's wide, laughing with admiration of this wise old law eagle; the judge's filled with the dew of honest affection. Pete chuckled as he reached out to clasp the hand of his friend.

"I hoped to put it across," he confessed. "Knowin' the odds was against me. Yo're wrong about the heifer, though. I'm passin' through, is all. But, whatever became of her?"

The lawyer's face hardened.

"The heifer," he drawled, "has had supper at the home of our esteemed banker—one of Palomas' two big bulls. The other bull was also invited. If I'm not mistaken, here they come now . . . . to talk business. No . . . . don't go! One doesn't close his doors when it's hot. And voices have a way of falling through open doors and becoming public property. Set, lissen, and your question is answered."

Pete glanced along the boardwalk. A panic had fallen upon him. He knew her at once. Sally Bender was as slender, as beautiful as ever, with the same nervous, bird-like turning of her head. Beside her strode Navajo Purcell, owner of the big P Dart outfit, the man whose charge had sent Pete to Yuma for ten years—less nearly six for checking a prison break and for good behavior. On the other side of the girl, his hand tucked confidingly in hers, swaggered a boy with swishing conchoed chaps and brave chiming of belled spurs. A small boy plentifully speckled and with towsy, corn-colored hair peeping from under his hat.

"Sally!" burst from Pete's lips, despite his effort at control. "An' Navajo! But the boy . . . . who's he, Judge?"

"That," murmured Cassius S. Kells, "is the Jew's-harp Kid. If you stay here, Pete, you'll meet him . . . . and love him. Don't go away!"

CHAPTER TWO

The Jews-harp Kid

AS the trio approached, Pete's gaze switched from the girl to Purcell. He had aged, was heavier. His hair was gray-

ing. But there was no softening of his savage eyes, of cruelly-hung mouth. Here was the brute who had deviled Pete's father, broken his heart, made him glad to lay down his burden. Here was the beast who had framed an innocent man into Yuma, that he might acquire his victim's ranch. Here was the bull who had driven smaller bulls, weaker ones from the range, whose hand lay over the land like a blight. His selfishness, his disregard for personal rights, was in his voice now as he hailed the lawyer.

"Hey, Cassius! Stir yore flabby body outa that chair. Here's business!"

"Evenin', Sally," came the lawyer's soft voice. "Hullo there, Jew's-harp! How's the calf crop out yore way? Howdy, Navajo. You spoke uh business. As you'll note, my hours are from eight to five. It's seven now. What business is so important it won't wait?"

Navajo Purcell flushed. His black eyes snapped. His glance at Pete betrayed no recognition.

"Hours!" he sneered. "Office hours. Why, you ain't seen a client all day. Now here's business and you won't move yore lazy carcass outa that chair. You've slipped, Cassius. It's time we got a new lawyer, one younger an' keen to serve."

"One that'll wear yore collar, eh, Cassius? What's the business?"

"I've persuaded Missus Price to sell me the Bar Circle B. It's too much for a girl to run proper, so I'm takin' it over. . . . Want you to draw up the grant deed an' notarize the contract to pay . . . ."

Mrs. Price! That hurt Pete. Then Sally had married . . . .

The lawyer clicked his tongue. "Shame, Sally. Sellin' off the old home. Why?"

The girl smiled wearily. "I hate to see it go, Uncle Cassius. Dad's buried out there and . . . . and Dick. But I'm weary. Worn out. Glad to let someone else run it . . . ."

"Come in," the lawyer rose, led the way inside, "where we kin talk private."

The girl laid a hand on the boy's shoulder. "You stay outside, Dickie. We won't be long . . . ."

"Aw, ma . . . .!"

SHE left him. The boy looked around, his blue eyes meeting Pete's gray ones. Soberly he stared, his brows knitting as he weighed the black-bearded stranger. Now he hitched up his chaps and deliberately sat down beside Pete.

"Gosh, pardner," he spat, disgustedly. "Ain't wimmen hell?"

"Ain't they though?" grinned Pete. "What they done to you, Kid?"

"Ma's sellin' the ranch, movin' tuh California. No hawsses, no cows! Nothin' but schools an' store clothes an' . . . ."

"An' no Jew's-harps, eh?"

"Jew's-harp? Say, Mister, how'd you know? I don't know you."

"I'm Curly Beard, a plumb stranger to yuh. As fer the Jew's-harp, I kin see it in yore shirt pocket. Play me a tune."

"Aw, I don't feel like it. You a cowpuncher, Curly?"

"Bronco snapper."

"Gosh!" The Jew's-harp Kid forced a grin of admiration. The grimace proved to Pete that the Kid didn't smile very often. It was a pitiful attempt, it stuck Pete like a knife. He realized with a shock that this old-faced youngster had never known the free happiness of boyhood, that his entire life had been shadowed by his mother's fight against terrific odds. The thought made Pete's burden of the lost years seem lighter. "Say," the boy resumed. "We gotta mean pony out to the ranch. Think you could set him?"

"Try me?" grinned Pete. "If yore ma says so, I'll . . . ."

"Aw shucks," exploded the youngster. "'T's no use. She's in there now sellin' the outfit, ponies an' all . . . ."

From the inside came the lawyer's drawl. "Sally, I've knowed you a long time. Next to yore folks, I reckon, I was the first man to trundle you. I helped raise you, give you advice about your kid troubles, later your heart affairs, and then your ranch problems. But this is the first time you've held out on me. I'm still your attorney. Tell me the truth, why are you selling the Bar Circle B?"

For an instant silence. Then Sally's voice, soft, hesitant. "I . . . . oh, you know I love that place, Uncle Cassius, love it and hate it. It was my home, the tomb of my hopes. There my father was murdered. And later . . . . Dick. Both are buried there. Since then life has been one long fight with cattle losses and cut fences, and no peace from men who demand to buy the spread. I was forced to borrow, as you know. The mortgage will soon be due and I can't pay. Robbins won't renew, but has got a buyer. He mentioned an amount for my equity that will keep Dickie and me . . . if we're careful. The buyer is Mister Purcell. I think I'd better take his offer . . . ."

"Do you realize, my dear," came the lawyer's patient voice, "that at first glance, I observe fatal defects in this contract to purchase. Maybe carelessness, maybe something worse. . . ."

"You hintin' I'm tryin' tuh rob Missus Price?" rapped the cowman. " 'Cause if yuh are. . . ."

"Hinting nothing, Purcell," retorted Cassius S. Kells. "Coming right out and advising my client not to rush into this matter. Just protecting her interests."

"This deal's finished tonight or it's off."

"Then," snapped the girl, and Pete grinned that she had absorbed courage from the old lawyer, "it's off. It's past the judge's office hours. Good evening, Mister Purcell."

"Gimme them papers!" snarled the cowman, and Pete heard him snatch the sheets. "Now, lissen to me, Miz Price, you're swayed by a dodderin' ol' fossil who's moulded on the shelf fer ten years an' don't know it. But I've got yore signed agreement to sell. You'll go through with it or I'll sue yuh. Better yet, I'll assign my interest to the bank an' let Raddon Robbins sue. He hires a Tucson lawyer by the year."

"When we're served with such a suit," snapped the lawyer coldly, "we'll answer!"

"You batty ol' coyote!" barked the angry cattleman. "You'll hear more from me."

"Lawin' or shootin'," countered Cassius S. Kells, "if you're lookin' for 'em, you've found 'em, Purcell." Unconsciously he relapsed to the range drawl. "A man that aims to scramble eggs in Palomas, has got to first crack shells. Good evening."

With war brewing, the Jew's-harp Kid had risen, stood trembling. Pete laid a calming hand upon him.

"Steady Kid!" he murmured.

"That snake can't talk thataway to my ma!" spat the youngster.

"Stick to me, sonny," grinned Pete, reassuringly, "like a flea to a dog's ear. If he gits snuffy, me an' you'll pole his hawns smooth fer him."

Now Navajo Purcell charged from the office, face contorted, eyes writhing. The Jew's-harp Kid tried to wiggle from Pete's grip. Failing that, he challenged shrilly.

"You squinch-eyed, skunk-stinkin' coyote!" he shrilled. "If I was loose, I'd make a bunch quitter of you fer talkin' thataway to a woman. Yeah, I'd make yuh hard to ketch."

Snarling, Navajo whirled. His long arm lashed out, fetched the boy an open-handed slap. The Kid was rocked, but not hurt.

Hardly had that blow landed when Pete leaped, straight up from the walk where he sat. Spewing oaths, Navajo had turned

away. Pete whirled him about, grinning savagely as he hit him. The echoes of that blow ran along the main street. Purcell's head snapped back, his feet left the ground and he piled with a crash against the wall of the law office.

For a moment Navajo lay there, gathering his wits. Then, as the straight form of his assailant loomed in his consciousness, he shot his hand to his gun.

"Drag it if you feel lucky, feller," grinned the bearded man. "But shore as you do, I'm puttin' you away. . . ."

Purcell's fingers relaxed. His eyes shifted to the street where men crowded near. With a deep growl, he climbed shakily up, his eyes scourging Pete.

"Look me over good," grinned Pete. "See somethin' yuh like—or mebbyso don't like?"

"No!" said Purcell, and his voice trembled. "I'm takin' yore measurement."

He flung away. Pete's eyes flicked to the doorway where Sally and the lawyer stood, their faces just a little white. The girl's eyes were flooded with pity.

"You shouldn't have done that," she said. "You've made a deadly enemy."

Pete wanted to answer. But his tongue was suddenly thick. He trembled with the nearness of her, with a recurrence of the passion he had thought dead. And while he stood there, disarmed, uncertain, a little hand slid into his from behind. The thin voice of the Jew's-harp Kid broke the spell.

"Gosh, Mom, wasn't Curly great? Curly Beard. He's a hawss peeler. Didja see him paste ol' Navajo Purcell. . . ."

"Dickie!" Sally snapped. Then to cover her sudden embarrassment she addressed the lawyer. "Uncle Cassius, I think we made a foolish decision tonight. I can't run the ranch any longer . . . profitably. They've stole me blind. They've lured my men away or bluffed them off, until I have only Old Jeff Hallett left. There's no chance. . . ."

"Tut tut," reproved the lawyer. "That don't sound like the daughter of yore father. Good men are scarcer'n money. But we'll get 'em. Take Beard here . . . Curly Beard. He'll make you a hand, won't yuh, Beard?"

As if from afar, Pete heard himself concur in the fatal suggestion, heard the shrill yelp of joy from the Jew's-harp Kid, heard the girl's promise to see him on the morrow as she took her leave. The lawyer's happy goodnight faded out. Then Pete was alone.

CHAPTER THREE

Ghosts

DAZED, Pete Demaree found the center of the street, walked swiftly to no place in particular. He was just walking off his inner turmoil trying not to listen to his guardian angel warning him to fork his horse and ride away.

Night had fallen magically. Stars glittered like jewels in the purple sky vault. Pete was alone, at the very outskirts of the town watching lights gleaming ahead. The black bulk of a house loomed before him, a big house surrounded by a picket fence. Large trees rustled in the warm breeze. The low shrubbery was whispering with it.

Here was the home of Raddon Robbins, mayor of Palomas, owner of the Palomas State Bank, father confessor for all the troubled ranchers on Palomas range and not slow to use, as an individual, the information that came to him as president of the bank. Here, in what he called The Idle Hour, he hatched plans, with Navajo Purcell, for the best interests of the country . . . and themselves.

Voices came from The Idle Hour—harsh, angry voices. Pete vaulted the fence, walked through rank growing things

to the edge of a rectangle of light, splashing from an open window.

Pete could see them both in there. Raddon Robbins and Navajo Purcell. Navajo sat tensely, nursing his sore jaw. The banker leaned back in his swivel seat, hands laced before his ample stomach in an attitude of studied benevolence.

"No, no, Navajo," he chided. "You forget my advice. I invited Missus Price tonight feeling sure she'd sell. She left willing to go clear through. What you could have said or done. . . ."

"Nary a damn thing," rasped the cowman. "It was that dish-faced ol' fossil—Cass Kells. He talked her out of it. But I've got her signed agreement. You witnessed it. Here's our chance to git that place legal by suin' her. I kin hire a lawyer, but why do that? You've got the one we want hired by the year. . . ."

The banker shook his head. "Not to fight Ol' Cassius. Oh my, no! He's slick an' sly as a fox dog. . . ."

"I'll smoke the old rat out!"

Robbins wagged his head in silent laughter. "You're methods are so crude, Navajo, so fumbling. I've heard two-three others talk that way about Cass. They went into quick decline and died. Even a top gunman like yourself better not tempt fate."

"Then you won't do nothin', eh?"

"I didn't say that. I won't sue Missus Price. I might talk to her, change her mind again. . . ."

"Then we're out money. This other way . . . no sir, Rad, you git yore way about ever'thing, allus out-talk me. But now it's my say-so. Here's these papers. I'm leavin' 'em with you. If you want tuh buy her out, you pay fer it. But if not, sue her on that agreement. I'll take care uh my end till I hear that the Bar Circle B is in yore name . . . an' mine."

He rose, turned toward a door. Behind him came the banker's refusal.

"Just wastin' your time, Navajo. I won't do it, that's all. Take your papers away. I've got no use for 'em."

"Yore lawyer, Rad, has use fer that paper," Navajo's voice rasped. "Papers ain't in my line. Fer the last time, will yuh handle it thataway?"

"No."

"That's all I wanta know."

The cowman flung himself from the room.

"Wait!" commanded the banker, and in the order was the hoarseness of fear at his throat.

BUT Navajo Purcell was gone. Pete heard him slam the front door, saw his swift shadow threading the shrubbery as he strode to the street. Now Pete moved to the window on silent feet. Raddon Robbins sat slumped in deep thought, the uncompleted deed and Sally's signed agreement in his lax hand.

Out whipped Pete's gun. It's muzzle, like a snake's head, eased across the sill. The banker squirmed in his seat, sighed, straightened. His eyes, drawn by some nervous reaction to the impact of unfriendly eyes, snapped to the window. His mouth fell open and he turned white.

"Roll up that agreement an' slide it down this gun barrel!" snapped Pete. "An' don't get funny notions or I'll shoot it through yore brisket."

Those eyes that could be so coldly impersonal when outlining the bank's responsibility to delinquent loans, were now flighty, wild with fear.

"Who?" gulped Raddon Robbins, "who are you?"

"Once you prided yoreself on remember in' faces, Mister Robbins."

The banker peered. "You're face is strange. But then the light. . . ."

"It isn't the light, Robbins. It's the beard. . . ."

The banker rose, peered at the black-bearded face framed in the aperture. Now his eyes seemed to bug. A greenish pallor overspread his face and his knees threatened to let him down. He fell back into his chair.

"You?" he gasped.

"Me," grinned Pete. "Seems like I remind you of somethin' you'd like to forget."

"You've got nerve, coming back here."

"Nerve?" Pete laughed bitterly. "Does it take nerve to face a rat like you, Robbins? Or Purcell? No . . . not nerve. Just a sense of humor, you cheap crook. Roll up that agreement, like I said."

"I . . . I can't do that. Navajo will kill me. You heard . . .?"

"I heard. You deserve killin' for playin' with him. If a man handles a skunk he picks up the smell. Quick . . . pass over that agreement!

"You're going to kill me!" Raddon Robbin's voice rose to a throaty scream. "I can see it in your eyes. You can't do that to me . . . without a chance."

"They can't send an innocent man to the pen, either," sneered Pete. "But you sent me there. You an' Navajo Purcell. An' without the smell of a chance."

"I had nothing to do with it!" cried the banker. "It was Navajo . . .!"

"What matter, Robbins?" asked Pete drily. "Yo're seein' ghosts. Thank God, I'm not poisoned with lust to kill, much as you two deserve it. I'm passin' through. But if you never see me again it ain't because I fear yore dollars . . . or Navajo's guns. Hand over that paper!"

Racked with the dismay of one who sees retribution, Raddon Robbins rolled the agreement, stuck it into the jutting gun barrel. His hand trembled so, it took moments to affect it. As the tube slid into the barrel, he slumped back into his chair, his eyes mutely pleading. Pete pocketed the paper, grinned tauntingly, holstered his gun and saluted the banker.

"*Adios,* Robbins!" He chuckled. "An' good luck with Navajo . . .!"

His grin faded and the chuckle froze in his throat. His gaze, wandering diagonally across the room to the corner window behind the banker, caught the oultines of a face—a swarthy face with snapping black eyes, thick sensuous lips, flaring nostrils, shaded by a wide, floppy hat.

PETE caught his breath. He knew that face, had good reason to recall it. It took him back to Yuma Prison where one stormy winter's night three prisoners were on the prod—Highyella Mosby, a big Negro murderer, Gopher Joe, an Apache killer and Peso Frank, a cross-bred border-hopper—armed with long knives from the prison kitchen.

High-yella, cook's helper and trusty, had opened the cell to release Gopher Joe and Peso Frank. Pete, newly arrived occupied the same cell. Suspicious of him, the three armed and desperate men forced him ahead as they crept along the cell blocks. Ahead gleamed the flickering coal of the sentry's shielded cigarette.

A warning hiss as the desperate trio stopped Pete. Then Gopher Joe stalked the guard with Apache stealth. Pete hadn't fooled himself as to chances. No balm for him if the break was successful. If he escaped the guns of the guards, killer knives would find his vitals. But, then, strangely, he thought of the guard. That man would die without knowing how —with a foot of cold steel in his heart. Revulsion swept Pete. Might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb. . . .

"*Quidado.*" he howled.

Shouting, he launched a vicious kick behind, and spun away in a flying fall from the hissing blade that ripped the shoulder of his denim jumper. His boot-sole crunched against bone. He heard the swift

obscenity of the big Negro's curse, then was springing from where he had fallen, hurtling at the Border breed.

Whirling, fighting, ducking, Pete backed before two aroused killers who slashed at him murderously, as the guard's gun sent Gopher Joe to join his ancestors in the Happy Hunting Ground. From four points on the walls came the calls of guards. The bell tolled on the gatling tower. In a blaze of silver light, the big searchlight winked on, commenced to lick into dark corners.

Seeing their last chance vanishing, High-yella Mosby snapped an order at Peso Frank. They darted away from Pete, hugging the shadows as they made for the kitchen, where a makeshift ladder lay. In the one open stretch to cross, the searchlight beam found the Negro in the lead. The gatling lead found him too.

Thoroghly aroused at their savagery. Pete followed as they darted away. Peso Frank went down, victim of a perfect flying tackle as Pete hurtled through the air. And thus, in one explosion of muscular effort, Pete saved the breed's life and, paradoxically, made him an enemy.

By blocking that desperate break, Pete earned the warden's plea for the Governor's clemency. And while it failed, due to political power of Raddon Robbins and Navajo Purcell, it rated Pete prison merits of more than three years.

And now, here was Peso Frank, looking across the two windows, with death in his eyes. Bodyguard for Robbins mebby. . . . Pete eyed the banker's charmed-bird stare. Yes, there seemed to be expectancy in the banker's shifty eyes, a gloating flush on his pallid cheeks.

Now the face of Peso Frank was gone and Pete heard rustling in the underbrush. Swiftly, Pete faded to his left, crossed the walk, threaded the shrubbery windingly and again found the street.

CHAPTER FOUR

In the Net

THOUGH it was early when Pete appeared on the street next morning, the sun was already up and it was hot. After attending his pony, any good puncher's first duty of the day, he bowlegged down to the Dove Restaurant. Tony, the proprietor, was grinningly silent Pete thought, as he pattered among his early morning patrons. Never a word did he say to the bearded one whose secret he shared. But several times Pete caught the man's eyes on him.

Some puzzled, Pete slid a dollar across the board. Tony came forward, shaking his head.

"Tony no maka de charge, my friend. Breakfast is a small price to pay for the good you do Palomas. I tella you wot. Yes, and many breakfasts. You can eat here whenever you are hungry . . . and it cost you not one cent, Pete."

"Why the sudden chigger rash uh generosity, Tony?"

Tony wagged his head slyly. "Dass all right, Pete. If Tony know nothing he say nothing. A full stomach, my friend, makes a easy conscience. I fill your stomach, Pete. Your conscience is your own."

He turned away to care for other patrons. Pete scowled in puzzlement, juggled the coin, watched Tony for a moment, then walked outside with a murmured, "Mebby yo're right, feller, but I'm damned if I know about what."

He was still puzzled when he went back to the hotel for his possibles. Sitting on the bed, his long face less readable than ever, was Cassius S. Kells.

"Come in, Pete," he said softly, "and close the door. Sit down. You look rested after the night's sleep."

"I am." Pete grinned into the lawyer's eyes. "I shore pounded by ear plenty last night."

The lawyer nodded sagely. "And it's a sure sign of weak mindedness when a man walks in his sleep. In some ways, Pete, you haven't sense enough to pound sand in a rat-hole. I'm surprised. . . ."

"What the hell . . .?"

"Were you figuring on going out to the Bar Circle B this morning?"

"Yes. I was gettin' ready to ride now. But before I went I was figurin' to hand you this. . . ."

He tossed the lawyer the agreement signed by Sally Price. Cassius S. Kells perused the thing, then folded it.

"Pete," he said severely, "you hadn't better go to Sally. She has trouble enough without harboring a murderer. . . ."

"A murderer . . . me?"

"Tell me about your visit to Raddon Robbins."

Haltingly, stunned with the spell the old lawyer had laid upon him, Pete told of his visit to the Idle Hour. ". . . an' then," he wound up, "when he had stuck the paper in my gun barrel, I backed away from the window an' come up town to go to bed. That's all."

"Then you didn't throw the knife that killed him?"

Pete gasped. "No. You mean Robbins is dead?"

"Dead as beef, Pete. I believe you when you say you are innocent. The question will be to prove you so, with the very natural motive you might have had to do it. You recall I lost my fight to prove your innocence in a matter far simpler than this. Pete, boy, we must find the killer."

"I know who he is, Judge!"

He told of the face at Robbin's window, the swart, evil face of Peso Frank. Of his fear at the moment that the man had been stalking him. For a moment after listening to the recital, the judge maintained a studious silence. Then. . . .

"That complicates it, Pete. Peso Frank is Navajo Purcell's prize gunman, his bodyguard. And Navajo was practically Robbins' partner. They'd laugh us out of court with that yarn."

"If they ever get us in court," clipped Pete, stiffly. "They'll never send me to Yuma again on a trumped-up charge. I'll go out in the smoke first. But before that happens, I'll find Peso Frank an' . . . well, I know ways uh makin' him give up head."

The judge nodded moodily. "Maybe it would be better all around, son, if you moved along. From what you say, only Tony and I know that you're here."

Pete shook his head doggedly. "No. From what Navajo said last night, he's figgerin' on puttin' the screws to Sally. Now that he's finished off Robbins, it means he's ready to start. I'm headin' fer the Bar Circle B right now."

"Yo're carryin' yore troubles tuh one that's in pore shape tuh handle 'em, son."

"I'll carry 'em to her," gritted Pete, loosening his gun in its leather, "only long enough tuh rid her of her own. Then I'm takin' mine away . . . far away."

He flung about, burst out the door and the old lawyer heard the clump of his boot heels on the stairs. For a long moment, Cassius S. Kells stood there, the weight of a rangeland showing in his sombre eyes. Then a small smile broke the harshness of his features and at as fast a pace as Palomas had ever seen him employ, he left the hotel and hurried to his office, in the rear of which he maintained sloppy bachelor quarters.

CHAPTER FIVE

Gunsmoke Ranch

FROM the hotel, Pete went to a barber shop and had his beard shaved off. He was the only customer and no others

came in while he was being served. He paid the charge and was half way to the stable when two men, both strangers to Pete, angled across to meet him. One wore the town marshal's badge.

"H'are yuh, stranger?" he hummed. "Who in the hell are you?"

"Who wants tuh know?"

"No offense," the lawman flushed. "Checkin' up on strangers, is all. There's bin a murder. We suspicion a black-bearded feller about yore size. Navajo Purcell had trouble with him yesterday an' saw him hangin' around the house of the murdered banker. Ain't seen him, have yuh?"

"Yes," said Pete. "In the hotel . . . not twenty minutes ago. Try there."

The marshal nodded. "An' you're . . .?

"A bronc snapper, headin' fer Socorro. My gun ain't bin fired in a month."

"This was a knife job!"

"Knife? Do I look like snake blood?"

"No-o-o, but. . . ."

"Try the hotel," Pete turned away.

The two watched him a moment, then hurried toward the hotel. At the corral, Pete worked fast. In a matter of minutes, he had paid, saddled and ridden into the bosky. When the marshal and his helper reached the street again with word that their quarry had checked out minutes before, Pete was a mile away, loping hard for the Bar Circle B.

WHEN Pete rode into what had been the Bender Ranch, before Whang Bender died and Sally changed it to the Price Ranch, in honor of the man she married and lost, the place seemed deserted, run-down. Corral fences needed repair. The windmill squealed for oil. Sadness struck Pete, who had known this place in its heyday. But he wasn't given time to indulge his regret. A voice ripped from the front window. . . .

"Light, neighbor, with yore hands above yore ears!"

Pete grounded, hands up. His eyes flicked to the gun leveled across the sill, along the sights to a glittering black eye.

Inside was a heavy boot tread. The front door creaked open. A man stood there, his short-gun on Pete's middle. A sleazy individual, with longhorn mustache, tobacco streaked chin and unsightly wedge face. Jeff Hallett, Sally's lone cowhand, was Pete's thought. Then that one at the rifle must be Sally herself . . . except that Sally's eyes were blue.

"Hallett?" he asked.

The man grimaced. "Yeah, Jeff Hallett."

"I'm Curly Beard," grinned Pete. "Yore new cowhand."

The man started. "New cowhand?"

"Didn't Sally . . . er . . . Miz Price tell yuh? She an' Judge Kells signed me on last night."

"Oh!" The man showed snaggle teeth. "I see. Come on in."

The command in that invitation stirred Pete. As he stepped to the porch, he watched that rifle follow him, as steel follows the magnet.

"Put down yore hands," chuckled the man in the doorway, "yo're all right. I'll have one of the boys put up yore pony."

One of the boys! Warning chilled Pete Demaree. Gun sheathed, the man stood there, buzzard-like, making way for Pete's entrance. Pete paused, a forced grin frozen on his face. And though the house was silent, Pete felt that inside were "the boys" watching the play, listening.

"Hell," he spat, "I'm at home in a house like a horse. How's fer showin' me what's to do here."

"Come in," invited the man, softly. "Talk to the boss about that." He motioned Pete inside. Nerves stiff, Pete swept the shadowy ranch parlor. It was empty. Tobacco smoke coiled in the ceil-

ing; a whisky bottle and glasses stood on the table. Behind him the man closed and bolted the door, then swung loosely past Pete, flashing a nasty grin.

"Don't go way," he advised. "I'll call the boss."

HE left the room. Through the closed panel struck the nervous shuffle of boots, the soft murmur of conversation. Pete indulged a reflection.

"Wisin' up the 'boys', eh? Where there ain't boys. Where I slipped was in tippin' my hand to this Jeff Hallett. Jeff Hallett, hell . . . I wonder what's gone with Sally . . . an' the Jew's-harp Kid."

The man came back, his eyes glowing.

"Boss'll see yuh now," he grinned. "Better gimme yore weepon. Miz Price is nervous thataway."

Had the statement not been dangerously significant, Pete would have laughed. Instead, he affected surprise.

"What?" he demanded. "Give up my gun?"

The man's face clouded. "You heard me, Curly. Take if off!"

Pete shrugged. "All right," he said grudgingly. "I feel naked without it, but . . . you asked for it!"

Pete pivoted, ripped his gun from its sheath. It rose and fell smashing across the other's solid skull. He fell soundlessly, his head clumping soddenly.

"Hey!" hollered Pete, aping the man's deep, hoarse voice. "He's got me hipped!"

Shouting, he leaped for a rear door, his going shrouded in the 'boys' sudden turmoil. Reaching the portal, he opened it, glanced into the kitchen. It seemed empty and Pete took the desperate chance. He popped through, drew the door nearly to as the first renegade burst into the parlor.

Pete hit the hammer of his six-shooter. The man stopped, shuddered, staggered back. Beyond him, before the door slammed shut, Pete glimpsed a flashing pistol and behind it the swart savage face of Peso Frank. The man's warning knifed the sudden stillness. . . .

"It's Pete Demaree, damn him. This is twice he crossed me. He's got Jingle-bob. Scatter out, you! Doors an' winders, it makes no defference. Smoke him down."

Pete would have answered that challenge with one of his own, but he knew in his heart it would be wasting time, where time was the essence. He was one against too many, with two windows and three doors to defend. Caution whispered that he capitalize their momentary demoralization, leave the house and chance finding their ponies. So, being an opinionated young man, he did quite the opposite.

Gun held loosely, he shouldered a cupboard cabinet before one window, upended a table before the other. The back door to the yard, he barred. There being no bar on the hall door, he tilted a chair against it.

ABOUT him now was a palpitant silence, and into it intruded Peso Frank's order. . . .

"Now . . . gunies! Rush him!"

They were coming. Pounding down the back hall! Racing through the parlor! Behind Pete's barricades, window glass shattered down as they slashed panes with swinging gun barrels.

Slipping the parlor door, Pete flung a halting shot. Hard on its blasting echoes came the answer, the lead splintering the panel. And then a man dislodged the braced chair, popping in from the back hall. Pete was ready. The man dropped at Pete's first shot. Pete leaped to the body, lifted a bowie knife and two Colt's self-cockers, flung into the gloomy hallway. It was empty.

Slamming the door on the leaden sleet pouring into the kitchen, Pete darted to the end of the hall and a door that gave,

he believed, into the room where the 'boys' had been sequestered. Pausing there for a moment, wiping sweat, gathering his forces.

Six-full gun leveled, Pete kicked the door open. As he surged inside it seemed that the parlor door went shut, but that might have been an illusion, so fleeting was the impression. Now Pete's eyes were on two seated figures before him. A man and a woman. Both tied to their chairs—both gagged. Sally Price! Jeff Hallett!

Someone had pole-axed the old cowpuncher, sending a thin trickle of blood down his seamed face. But it hadn't dimmed the fighting ire in his faded eyes. The girl's goldstone eyes were tearful, pleading, rife with mute appeal. Pete didn't hesitate. Leaping to them, he cut the cruel ropes, ripped away their gags.

"In the back hall! he ordered. "Out here we ain't got the chance of a pack rat at a coyote congress. Here . . .!"

HE thrust a self cocker upon each of them, forcing them, against their struggles, into the hall. Jeff Hallett was cursing, Sally crying softly. And out of their confused mumblings, Pete made one word . . . *Jew's-harp*. It startled him.

"Yeah," he snapped. "The Kid. Where's he at?"

"Gone!" Sally's wail knifed Pete. "He took Dickie just as you entered. . . . The one they call Peso."

"A black vinegaroon!" snarled Jeff. "I'm goin' outside an' nail him to the fence."

"I'll take the front," called Pete.

Outside a rifling yell! The quickening beat of hoofs! Pete dashed front, threw the door open. The renegades were loping away, two wounded men in the lead with another who carried a boy before him. Five others covered the retreat, their guns snarling at Jeff, who swapped the favor. At the rack, Pete's horse lay kicking feebly, a bullet through its brain.

Now Jeff was sprinting toward the corral, to rope a mount. Pete went inside. Sally met him, trying bravely to smile.

"Pete!"

"Sally!"

"You've come back after . . . after all these years."

Pete dropped his eyes. "Everybody's short on brains, Sally," he said, philosophically. "The man that never made a mistake, was borned paralyzed an' never outgrew it."

"If you hadn't come back . . . just when you did," she reproved, "what would have happened to us? Dickie . . . will they harm him?"

Pete started. "The Kid! No . . . I reckon not, Sally. Mebbyso hold him to force yore hand. If we let it get that far. Soon as Jeff saddles a horse, I'm takin' their trail."

"Curly Beard?" she asked, hopefully. "I heard him talking out here. Is he with you?"

Pete flushed. "I was Curly Beard . . . before I shaved it."

"Oh!" she gasped. "Oh. Then you're working for me?"

"Yes'm. But first I'm riding . . . ."

"Pete! They're too many. You'll walk into their trap and . . ." her lip trembled, ". . . I'll have to bury you too."

Jeff Hallett's hail startled them.

"There's Jeff!" announced Pete. "No use waitin'. So long, girl. . . ."

He squeezed her cold hand, turned away. Behind him floated her prayerful "God bless you, Pete. Bring Dickie back . . .!"

It stopped Pete. He turned, renewed confidence in his gray eyes.

"If I do, Sally," he murmured, "an' hone to stay in this country, which I never would 'a' left except for. . . ."

She nodded, tears starting again. "Then,

Pete," fervently, "it's still: God bless you."

CHAPTER SIX

Prayer Answered

PETE strode outside, thrilling to the old love.

"Jeff," he commanded. "Climb off that bronc so I can top him. You span up some wagon ponies an' drive yore boss to town."

"I'm fetchin' the Kid," snapped Jeff.

"An' leave Sally for them hellions to find when they come back?"

Jeff Hallett wavered. "You goin' after Jew's-harp? One man can't lick twenty."

"That's what twenty think," retorted Pete. "But it'll take some provin'. A tree's got plenty leaves: girdle the trunk an' they fall. The P Dart is like that. Girdle it by snuffin' out Purcell an' them that draw his gun pay will rabbit."

A satisfied chuckle shook Jeff Hallett.

"All right, feller. I can't see that far fer the fog of yore loco chin music. But go ahead. I'll take Sally to the Palomas House, in town, an' be hangin' around close. If yuh need me, put up a holler. Don't strain yore luck, boy."

Pete acknowledged Jeff's Godspeed with a murmured, "see you in hell," took the reins from him, rose to the saddle. With a last glance at the crushed girl in the doorway, he jabbed home the spurs. His horse rocketed away. Pete didn't dare look back, so filled with ire was he that a good woman, without help or resources, must bear the brunt of a rangehog's greed.

PETE rode hard only to the barranca where Peso Frank and his men had vanished. Then took up the trail by foot. It wasn't hard to follow. But success, he felt, rested upon reading all the sign.

Toiling painfully on, Pete bent to his task, missing no hint in those steel-shod tracks. The sun had set when he found what he looked for. A single track cutting obliquely away from the pack, toward the hills and the misty peaks of the blue mountains beyond. Pete mounted and followed.

The trail wound its way through the hills and was patently hitting for the Slot. Pete rode the spurs, but night flung its dusky mantle across the range before he reached the mouth of the Slot, a black and forbidding rift in the granite walls.

Pete didn't pause before the mystery threat of this wet vault, for it was on a part of his father's old range. Indeed, at the upper end of the Slot, was the stone line-cabin in Hanging Valley, the cabin his father had laid up more than thirty years ago. Many a time Pete had ridden this trail with his dad. The place brought up old memories burningly. . . .

Pete reviewed those lost years with hard, crystal-clear contemplation. P Dart cattle had been traced to Hanging Valley. The two Mexicans guarding them had made no fight, showed no fear, expressing amazement when told they were herding stolen beef, cursing the lying *patron* who had hired them for such *trabajo.* Who was that *patron?* Why el Señor Pedro Demaree, the young *ranchero.*

It had been a perfect deal, all right, for certain conviction. And through those torturous weeks preceding the Yuma trip, Pete hadn't heard from Sally. Not a word. The hurt of that had dulled the ache of the ten-year sentence. Black years of penal servitude—bitter days of drudgery. And the steamy, aching nights, trying to sleep . . . and forget.

And now . . . Pete was ashamed that he had once damned Sally for her neglect. They had forced her to sit helplessly and see her boy taken away. How easy to have kept her from the jailhouse, with Navajo Purcell and Raddon Robbins already putting the screws to her father? Her letters might very easily have been

destroyed. Softly Pete swore to the stars to remove that doubt from his heart forever, never to mention it. Pete didn't know Dick Price. But he must have been good for Sally to have married him.

The widening of the slot warned Pete he had traversed its length. He caught the sweet meadow smell of Hanging Valley, reined in. Ahead, vague and shadowy in the starlight, loomed the unlighted line cabin. There was no smell of smoke, no alien sounds. Speaking to his horse, Pete edged forward, the animal's going muted in the deep grama sod.

Above Pete was a sudden creak of leather, a crash of brush. Pete reared his mount to meet the threat, his gun flashing. A horseman loomed on the slope, a vague and swaying outline. Inchoate sixth sense warned Pete that he had been observed on the trail, that he had blundered into their trap. But still he didn't fire.

"Son," his father had preached, "never forget that a dog an' a wolf look alike under the stars."

And so Pete waited . . . to make sure. Nor had he long to wait. From the plunging rider on the slope came a flowing challenge, the words blotted out in the roar of his gun. Orange muzzle-fire slashed the ebon curtains of night. The bullet took Pete's pony between the eyes. It went down like a sledged steer.

Pete, versed in the game of when to stay and leave, lit clear of the threshing beast. His gun was bucking, spraying its loads at those crimson bursts. Then it seemed that the flickering muzzle-flames exploded into a ballooning sheet of fire that shriveled Pete's brain, consumed him. His strength poured away, like grain from a rotten sack.

WITH a sense of vagueness, unreality, Pete came alive. He heard the purling of placid water, the cool rustling of cottonwoods, and . . . he was sure . . . strange music.

"Bong, bong, bong-bong, bong-along. . . ." Weird, tuneless music. Soft . . . swelling dolefully. . . .

Was this death? Pete shook his head, striving for complete consciousness. Now he was aware of his throbbing head. He moved his arms . . . his legs. He felt no pain as his fingers ran exploringly over his body for wounds. He touched his forehead and then he knew. His fingers found a painful abrasion, came away wet and sticky. Creased! Pete laughed softly, his brain cleared of shock. He sat up.

"Bong, bong-along, bongety-bong, bong. . . ."

"A jew's harp!" he murmured to himself, and laughed aloud, adding happily: "The Kid!"

He climbed shakily up, moved to his dead horse. Wedged against the carcass was the crumpled body of his assailant, the face ghastly with its own blood. Pete rolled it over, unsnapped the rope on his own saddle. Shaking out a loop, he moved deliberately toward the renegade's horse, browsing a rod or two away. He got the brute, first cast, rose to the saddle, loped to the house.

"Bong-along, bong, bong, bongely-bong!"

Pete grinned as he swung down, walked to the hasp-fastened cabin door. The gritty little critter, tired, hungry, scairt, locked up in a lonely, pack-rat infested cabin. He was falling back on the only comfort he had—his jew's harp. Pete winced at the gnawing of his own empty belly, wished he had fetched some food.

"Hey . . . Kid!" he called, rattling the door.

The doleful music ended. Momentary silence, then . . .

"Keep outa here, you lousy snake!" came the Kid's piping threat. "I found me a six-pistol in here an', shore as you

show yore ugly face inside that door, I'm blowin' it loose from yore neck!"

Pete laughed. "Don't yuh know me, Kid? Curly."

"Curly? Curly Beard?" A gasp, and the Kid came hurtling to the door. "Gravy, pardner, I knowed you'd come. Lemme outa this hole."

Pete flung the door wide. The boy surged out, peered hard, then sobbed as he clutched the man's arm. Deep shudders wracked him.

"Why, Kid," chuckled Pete. "Yo're cryin'."

"Cryin' hell," sobbed the Jew's-harp Kid. "I'm laughin' that I didn't do what I almost done. . . ."

"What's that?"

"I almost shot yuh, pardner. Right through the door. Thinkin' you was that ugly Pinto."

Pete didn't smile at that play acting. It was too serious, too real to this abused and imaginative boy.

"Good thing fer me, Kid, you held yore fire. Keep yore gun in yore pocket. We won't need it now."

"We shore will," whispered the Kid, "if we don't hit the trail. Pinto will . . ."

". . . never ride again," finished Pete grimly. "I shot him. Now up yuh go!"

He boosted the Kid into the saddle, then rose from the stirrup, placing the youngster sideways across his lap. Touching the pony with the spurs he moved away from the lonely cabin. A little hand stole up about his neck. The boy snuggled close. On that dark, damp trail through the slot, the Kid held silent. Then, when they broke into the open, he sighed contentedly. "Ma all right?" he asked.

"Finest kind."

"An' Jeff?"

"An' Jeff."

"When I heard shootin'," the Kid confessed, drowsily, "I prayed it was you, pardner."

Pete said nothing, just patted that slender shoulder. The Kid relaxed. His head fell forward and he slept, the jew's-harp clutched in his hand. The prayer of the Jew's-harp Kid was answered.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Challenge

IN THE first gray dawn light, an exhausted pony limped to the bluff overlooking the bottomlands . . . and Palomas. Bestriding him was Pete Demaree, red-eyed with weariness, his left arm numb from supporting the sleeping Jew's-harp Kid. But not until that arm dropped off, would Pete relax his dogged hold, such was his inherent stubborness. He might have shifted his burden to the other arm, but that he ruled out. There was work for that arm, when Palomas was reached.

The sun was breaking above the eastern rim when Pete reined down the long main street of the town. As he passed the first straggling houses and entered the strung-out business district, a gaunt figure rose from a chair before the Palomas House, darted toward him at a gangling lope. All night, Jeff Hallett, had maintained his ceaseless vigil, watching the west approach of the town for Pete and the Kid. Now he dashed up, his eyes fixed on Pete's burden, steeling himself grimly.

"God, Demaree, is the Kid . . . is he dead?"

"Nary a hair harmed, Jeff," grinned Pete, wanly. "Just ketchin' up on his snore. Damn if he's missed one wink since we left Hangin' Valley."

"Hangin' Valley? God, man, you bin all the way there an' back?"

"All the way, Jeff. Take the game little critter to his ma. I've got work tuh do."

"Such as what?" barked the old cowdog, lifting the boy from Pete's stiffened arm. "What's up?"

"Quien sabe?" grinned Pete, chafing

blood back into his fingers. "I'll know after I see the judge."

Jeff nodded, wheeled, started for the hotel with the sleeping youngster. Pete rode to the office of Cassius S. Kells, swung down, rapped at the door. He was still rapping when two men walked out of the Dove Restaurant, angled across the street to him. They were the town marshal and his deputy.

"What you want?" barked the marshal, planting himself with spread legs and angled elbows. "The judge ain't in town."

"Where's he at?"

"That's his business!" rapped the lawman. "Personal, I don't care if he never comes back. Demaree, I've got yuh cold. You lied yesterday an' I'm some surprised you'd have nerve to come back. Yo're the bearded gent Raddon Robbins named as his killer in his dyin' note. You shaved them whiskers off yesterday mornin'. I'm arrestin' yuh, Demaree."

Pete's lips drew back snarlingly. "Try it, yuh big work-ox!" he dared. "An' I'll shoot a row of buttonholes up an' down yore brisket. You an' yore ribby deputy both. Raise a tall dust, both of yuh. Find Navajo Purcell. Tell him Pete Demaree's in town. Tell him I'm no easy mark for a second frame-up to Yuma. I'm hopin' he's manned with guts to pull his gun on me. So I can kill him without it bein' murder."

His voice echoed hollowly through the suddenly silent town. Men banked in a dozen doorways. The marshal wavered before Pete's hot eyes, glanced at his deputy. That worthy jerked his head toward the hotel. The marshal gulped, nodded.

"Navajo's asleep in the hotel, Demaree. I'll wake him up. At that, mebby he's the one to handle this ruckus."

"Why not?" sneered Pete. "He owns you an' yore star, from foretop to hocks."

The lawman flushed. "I'll make you eat them words, feller."

"Shore yuh will," taunted Pete. "You'll lay in the brush tuh git even . . . yore deputy in front of yuh. Fine. Form a line, you lousy bushwhackers. Hunt you a thicket anytime it suits yore fancy. . . ."

BUT the two were hurrying out of hearing of his tirade, heading for the hotel. Hardly had they vanished within the two-story frame building, when a woman popped out onto the sidewalk, came running to Pete. Sally! Pete looked about nervously. But there was neither ways nor means to escape her swift approach.

"Pete!" she gasped, stopped before him. "You've done a wonderful thing for me . . . and mine. Dickie hasn't a scratch. He's awake, singing your praises till I could hardly break away. Don't spoil it all by . . ."

"By what, Sally?"

"By fighting this duel. I heard you challenge Navajo. He'll accept and . . . and kill you. Already these awful P Dart guns have taken my all . . . except Dicky. I can't prove it, of course. But now . . . if they take you, I'll . . ."

"Do you care so very much, Sally?"

"Much?" Her voice trembled hysterically. "So much that I . . ."

Before the entire town, without restraint or shame, she flung her arms about his neck, flattened her face against him. One instant Pete strained her to him, pressing his lips to her hair, before she broke away.

"Pete," she gasped, staring at his blood-flecked shirt. "They've wounded you."

"Nicked me, honey," he said softly. "Above the temple. A scratch."

"Give this up, Pete."

"I can't, Sally. Don't you see? With that cancer festering on this range, there'll be no peace for decent folks?"

"Let him have it!" she cried. "Let decent people move away. It isn't worth it, Pete. If he kills you . . ." Fierceness edged

her voice. ". . . then I don't want to live either. If you kill him, don't you see, Pete? His face will be between us like a ghost. Give it up, Pete. We'll ride out, you and me . . . and Dickie."

In her eyes burned the more fluent plea she hoped would save this man, torn once from her side and, now, magically returned. Her love stirred him deeply, tempted him. He brushed vagrant wisps of hair from her brow, cast a wavering glance into the street. What he saw stiffened his weakening purpose.

Along the street now men stared at the door of the Palomas House. Yonder hurried Jeff Hallett, his gaunt face a mask, his stride long and loose as a cougar's. Cradled in his big hands was a stubby .45-70 saddle gun. His eyes, like burnt embers, met Pete's. A message flashed between them. Then Jeff flung into the Dove Restaurant, where nervous Tony Sansoni gripped a double barreled shotgun.

PETE put Sally from him, his mouth suddenly hard. "No use, Sally girl. A feller can't run away from trouble no more'n he can dodge bullets. Dead or alive, we've gotta face it out an' . . . an' beat it. Go on back to Dickie like a good girl. I'll come to you after . . "

She searched his face for some faint hope of compromise, found none. Her shoulders sagged, she turned away, walked dejectedly into the hotel.

A sigh ran through the town. Pete's eyes snapped to the Cave Saloon. Banked in the doorway stood swart Peso Frank and his ugly gun riders, their frozen faces turned toward the hotel. Pulsing rage hammered at Pete's heart. Stepping lightly off the walk, he strode toward them. They met his hot glance, did a fade-out, backing into the barroom.

He paused a moment to regard the horses at the rack. They were all P Darts. Whipping out his Barlow knife, he slashed the reins of the ground-tied ponies, slapped them away, humanely saving them from the flying lead he knew would come. Moving to the door of the saloon, he stepped inside.

Foolhardy? Mebbyso. But entirely in keeping with Pete's reckless mood. There was no one in the barroom save a single drink-dispenser who eyed Pete owlishly.

"Peso Frank! Where's he at?"

"Search me. Look around if yuh want."

Pete nodded, shot a look at the partly closed door of a rear card room, decided against it.

"Let it ride," Pete's words snapped like bullets. "Tell the gent that when the dust settles around Navajo's carcass, Pete Demaree's comin' here to make him belly crawl like the snake he is. Tell him that!"

Whereupon he wheeled, found the street. A low and excited mutter was sweeping the spectators. Pete's eyes shot to the hotel front. Navajo was walking unhurriedly down the steps, his gun palmed, his eyes on the loads as he spun the cylinder and tried the action.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Through the Smoke

AS IF bored, Navajo Purcell holstered his gun, let his eyes run along the street till he found Pete. For one long, palpitant moment, they matched stares across the distance, each renewing in his heart all the natural antipathy he held for the other. Then as if motivated by a single force, each walked straight to the street center, angled stiffly and started toward each other. . .

From behind Pete came Jeff Hallett's full-throated bawl.

"Don't worry about yore back, Pete! Tony's watchin' the back of the Cave an' me the front. First one uh them snakes that wiggles, we're shootin' off his rattles!"

Good old Jeff! Pete chuckled, but his eyes never left that crouched, deadly figure

with the poised arms, that approached him so deliberately. He had to hand it to Navajo for having more guts than might be expected of the leader of a bushwhacker crew. Or was it guts? Mebby it was contempt for the man he had adorned with a felon's stripes.

Step by step they cut down the distance. Step by step . . . step by step. The pace slowed. Now both men halted. They were a scant fifteen yards away. An uncanny silence held the town in its spell. A fierce and hateful grin swept Navajo's cruel face.

"I got yore challenge, Jailbird," he sneered, "an' I hope you didn't neglect yore gunplay, while you was sequesterin' in the Big House."

That shook a lot of the tension out of Pete. So that was it? Navajo was playing it bold and brave, figuring that incarceration had slowed his draw, destroyed his aim. Well, it had done a lot of things to him, but neither of those.

"Navajo," he snapped, "I wouldn't have challenged if I couldn't make a six-shooter shake hands, lay down, roll over an' play dead. Yeah, an' walk tight rope."

That quiet statement of confidence shook some of the fighting blood from Navajo's face. He kept shooting glances at the Cave Saloon, as if expecting something that was never fated to happen. For Jeff Hallett watched door and windows like a hawk, his gun slanted across Tony's counter.

"What's the matter, Navajo?" Pete taunted. "Need some bottled brave-maker. Well, it won't come outa the Cave. You're through here in the Palomas country. If you won't pull yore gun, you'll go to jail. Somehow, someway, we'll git the truth uh yore bitter medicine outa the coyotes that draw yore pay."

Navajo flushed, hung his head. "I reckon yo're right," he muttered.

Pete gasped at the calm way the man accepted the cold truth.

"Turn around!" commanded Pete, "an' walk back to the hotel. I'm lockin' you in a room till I get the lowdown on yuh!"

All his bravado apparently gone, his shoulders slumped abjectly, Navajo Purcell nodded, turned slowly. And then, as lightning burns from a blackly clouded sky, he shed his pose. As he wheeled, his hands flashed. As his two black guns swept out, he crouched and spun. It was a bushwhacker trick, one that has notched off many a good man. But Pete wasn't asleep. As Navajo's guns split the silence with their blasts, Pete drew and fired from the holster lip. His bullet halted Navajo's death play, but so quickly did he shed the shock that Pete was hard put to get in a second shot before the man reorganized his aim.

Navajo straightened, shivered. His guns barked, their loads plunging into the dust. His arms fell, the two pistols falling from his weakening fingers. Swaying there, in the clammy grip of lethal paralysis, his eyes rolled upward with dawning horror. His lips curled back from his stained teeth, giving his gaunt and unforgiving face a wolfish cast as his knees buckled. Now he was prone in the dust . . . dead! Navajo was gone. Gone forever from the haunts he had scourged.

For a few clock ticks, as Pete stood there reloading, there was a profound, unhealthy silence over Palomas. Then it was broken by a shout. A shot rang out. Something smashed into Pete's side, appearing to his acute senses to pass clear through him. He staggered, righted himself, throwing his gun around to this new threat. Yonder, screened from Jeff Hallett's watchful guardianship, stood the town marshal and his deputy, both shooting.

Pete gave backward, his guns bucking in his fingers. And, after that, things were in a mess of confusion as bullet-

shock spread through his system. He could hear Jeff bellowing, hear the timed blasting of his .45-70. Sally was screaming, "Pete! Pete!" over and over again.

Pete dropped behind a water barrel at the downspout of a building, fired at the strangely distorted shapes of the marshal and his deputy. And then the scene was blotted out by a horde of swift-traveling horsemen. Riding at their head was a cold-eyed man whose "Stop firing!" carried the weight of plenty authority. And beside him—or was it a dream—rode that passive-faced bulwark of Palomas . . . Judge Cassius S. Kells. . . .

PETE couldn't be sure that it wasn't all a dream. Nor did he care a lot. The next thing he knew, he was spread out on the walk, while a sober-eyed sawbones prodded along his ribs.

"Bullet hit a rib, deflected along it an' come out at the backbone," he intoned. "Barrin' poison, he'll live to be hung legal."

"Thank God!" came Sally's voice, and Pete realized that his head was pillowed in her lap. He wanted to josh her about thankin' God that he could be hung legal, but somehow he was too drowsy to frame the words.

Judge Kells came elbowing through the crowd, stood grinning down at Pete.

"Figgered it was about time we got some real law in here, Pete boy," he chuckled. "So I rode fer Tucson an' the sheriff. Got here just in time, looks like. Didn't think the ol' man had that much saddle whackin' left in his carcass, did yuh, son?"

Again Pete was spared the effort of answering as Jeff Hallett came shouldering his way to the inner circle.

"How's Pete, Doc?"

"Logy, but all right."

"Fine. Fast work, younker, but not too fast by more'n a eye-winker. I orta have my south end kicked around my ears fer not watchin' Navajo's crooked marshal, as well as Peso Frank an' his P Dart snakes. Well, the sheriff's got 'em all rounded up an' Peso's talkin', givin' up head scandlous. What he's already told, puts you in the clear an' them boys in the pen fer life . . . if not the rope. . . ."

He paused for breath. From the edge of the circle, a nervous boy danced. His left hand was cupped at his mouth, his right beat rhythmical, tuneless music from a whining jew's harp.

"Bong-along, bongety-bong, bong, bong. . . ."

Pete turned his eyes, met those of the Jew's-harp Kid.

"H'are yuh, pardner," he grinned. "Doc says yo're too previous with the funeral march."

The boy lowered his hands, his eyes sparkling. "Better look out, pardner," he warned. "Ma's lookin' yuh over. I kin see that look in her eyes. She's fetchin' to wash yore neck an' ears. . . ."

"Dickie!" reproved Sally.

"Besides," continued the boy, devilishly, "that wasn't no funeral march. It was a weddin' march."

"An' me," put in the laughing judge, "I'm invited to dance at the weddin' . . . remember?"

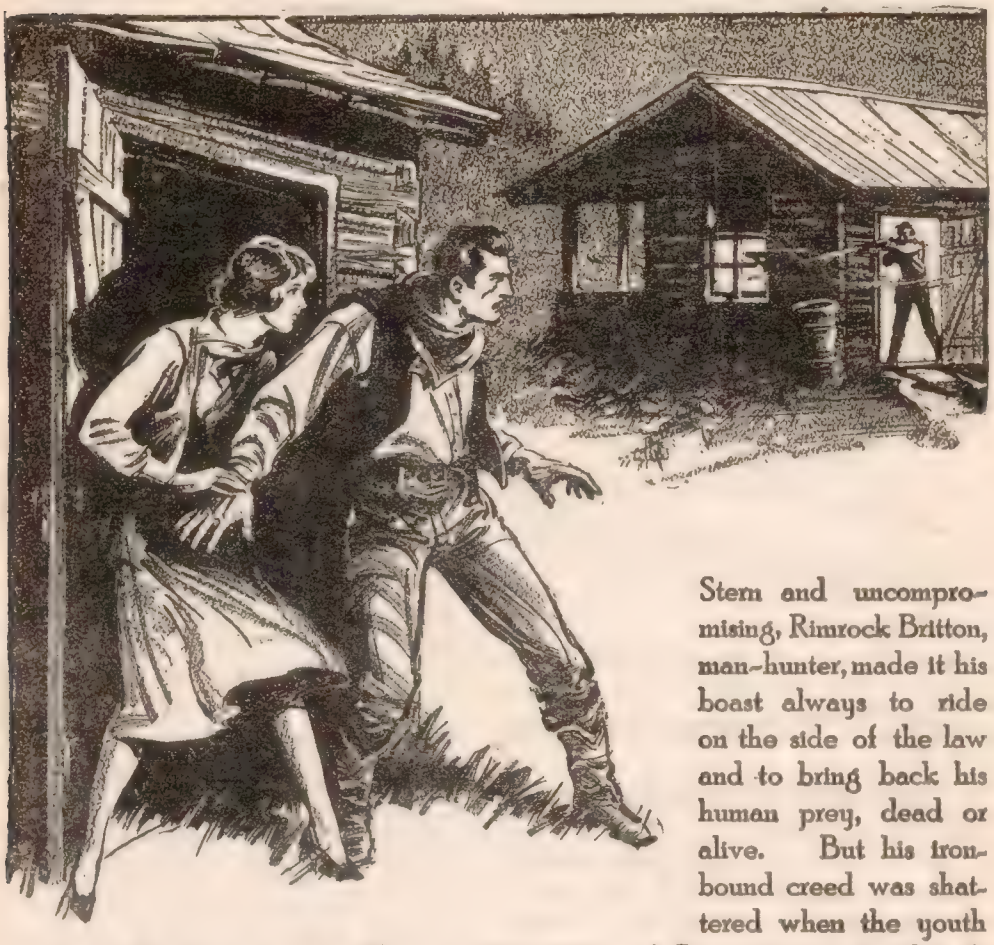
And he did.

THE END

WALT COBURN, HARRY F. OLMSTED,
RAY NAFZIGER, T. T. FLYNN,
ROBERT E. MAHAFFAY, BART CASSIDY!

All in the September 15th Issue . . . Out August 31st!

BOUNTY-HUNTER'S



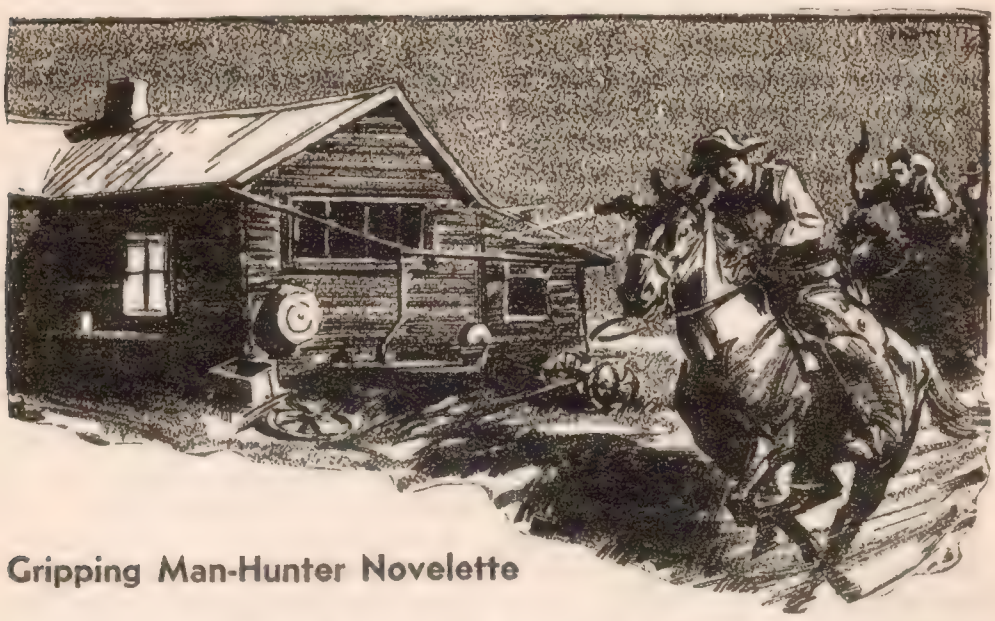
Stern and uncompromising, Rimrock Britton, man-hunter, made it his boast always to ride on the side of the law and to bring back his human prey, dead or alive. But his iron-bound creed was shattered when the youth who bore his name turned off on another trail, and Rimrock was faced with the fact that no man is all good or all bad — and had to learn it through heart-break and gun-smoke.

THEY nicknamed grizzled Jim Britton "Rimrock," and the name fitted, if you thought of the stark, granite rims of the Hatchet range where he had a small ranch. A big man, Rimrock Britton, with a hard, tough body, and a harder, tougher soul. For with him, ranching was only a side-line; his chief business was man-hunting, and he had kept at it for thirty years. Often enough, when other two-legged bloodhounds failed, the Law would call in Rimrock Britton, knowing him to be relentless, unshakable once he took a trail; and a cool, fast hand with a gun when showdown was called.

Law officers took their lives in their hands when they rode into the deep canyons and high peaks of the Hatchets, but Rimrock Britton went in safely for wanted men. He was at home in that wild, forbidding outlaw country, perhaps because he never bothered the scattered

BREED

By RAY NAFZIGER
(Author of "Lawman's Oath," etc.)



Gripping Man-Hunter Novelette

old-time ranchers—most of whom had ridden the owlhoot trail and were still wanted. Not only did they let him ride in for fugitives, but they also gave him tips about those who had slipped into the old hangouts.

Thus those grizzled renegades paid Rimrock's price for letting them alone, saying cynically that Rimrock didn't bother them because they had no bounty on their heads. When he played bloodhound, his nose had to sniff a reward before it would follow a trail.

Sometimes he took other jobs besides hunting men—gun jobs, but always he kept on the right side of the law. Men cursed him for that, too; claiming that Rimrock's guns were for hire to the highest bidder, but if that was true, the fact never bothered the man-hunter.

Sheriff Jeff Bird of Malapi County was thinking all this over as his horse picked its way up toward the pine-belted ridge and the little log cabin where lived Rimrock Britton and his adopted son, Curt.

Two of a kind, they said of the Brittons, although Rimrock was big, solid and dark; and the boy he had raised was blond and tall. But they had the same ability to trail, to shoot and to ride for long weeks at a stretch, wearing out horse after horse. And the boy had never learned from his foster-father what fear meant.

Sheriff Bird found Rimrock chopping wood, handling the double-bitted ax as if it were a toy.

"Got a little job for yuh, Rimrock," said Bird. "Enough money in it to interest yuh—a thousand dollars."

Britton stuck the ax into the log and wiped his hands on his levis. "I could use a thousand dollars," he said slowly, "if it was laid on the line where I could see the color of it."

"It's money that'll ring sound," said the lawman. "Offered by George Shaut, down in the Media Via country. You've heard of him—brands ten thousand calves every spring. His son was killed at a dance, and there's a thousand on the cowboy that done it—Dan Liverance. He's

twenty-one years old; hundred and eighty pounds; five feet, ten inches; dark complected; blue-eyed, and his left ear will be healing up from a bullet. He's wanted for murder and since he loped out to dodge trial, the reward goes for him dead or alive. He passed by the CX ranch yesterday, headin' into the Hatchets. He's proddy enough to shoot it out, account if he goes back, Shaut is willin' to spend a fortune to hang him. That's the lay. Want to shove out chips?"

Britton nodded. His eyes lit up a little. "I'll bring him in."

He waved to Curt who was just hazing their small remuda into the horse corral. A fine figure in the saddle was Rimrock's six-foot adopted son, his features straight and impassive under the narrow-brimmed sombrero worn by cowboys of the brushy mountain country.

"Turn 'em all out except Rock and Blaze!" Rimrock called. "We ain't ridin' after cattle today."

"Makin' a bloodhound outa the boy, too, Rimrock?" asked the sheriff. "Don't yuh think one is enough in the family?"

THE anger within him rising slow at the slur, Rimrock turned, level-eyed, to the sheriff. "What's wrong with that, Bird?" he asked coldly. "Most any fool can learn to build a loop, but few men got the nerve or savvy to go after outlaw rattlers that can strike four hundred yards with a Winchester. I never made no money on cows. What I got laid away comes from the men I've caught. Blood money, they call it, and I'm proud of it. The only blood on it is the blood shed by the killers I dragged in. Some of 'em had killed badge-toters like you, Bird.

"I wasn't throwin' no slams yore way," Bird said. "But that Curt youngster yuh raised is a damn' fine boy. He aint the kind to get a livin' by trackin' down men."

"He'll be better than me at it," said Britton, with pride in his voice. "He's a natural shot, and twice as fast as me with a gun. Eyes like a hawk, an' a fighter. He ought to be a fighter," he added, his voice trailing off, "considerin' who his father was."

Sheriff Bird pricked up his ears. "Yuh never did say who his father was," he remarked.

"No, I never did," said Britton pleasantly. "Now where'll I deliver this Dan Liverance?"

"The Media Via sheriff is at Malapi now. I'll have him wait to take Liverance back. How soon'll you have him there?"

"Two—three days," said Britton. "And keep yore notions to yoreself, Bird, as to what I'm raisin' Curt to be. That's my business, an' his."

"I kin take a hint," said the sheriff. "But some day, Rimrock, all the men you brought in, part of 'em tied across their saddles, may rise again' yuh. Some day yore bloodhound pup may turn out to be a different breed. Curt's got a heart in him. Chaw over that a while!"

Britton's ax bit into the wood again. He was a machine without nerve or emotion. The one time he had shown sympathy had been when he had taken the young orphaned three-year-old kid to raise, treating him as well as he would have his own son.

THEY rode out, Curt and Rimrock, with a little jerky, coffee and flour on their saddles, their rifles riding in stirrup leathers. Two men going out to stalk dangerous game. Rimrock was feeling fine. He glanced at Curt and felt a rush of pride and sudden pleasure. He had long looked forward to the time when Curt would be riding with him. Manhunting was to Rimrock's mind the only worth-while occupation—a high occupation. Then his eyes clouded as the echo of the sheriff's words returned to him:

"Some day the bloodhound pup may turn out to be a different breed. Curt's got a heart in him."

Late that afternoon the Brittons picked up the trail of the fugitive. On the hard rock country, Rimrock lost the tracks, but after a moment Curt's hawklike eyes picked out a chipped particle of stone made by shod hoofs, and they went on. When the sign became fresh, they hobbled their horses in a small canyon near some water. Then, changing their boots for moccasins, they walked forward, the boy in the lead, swinging ahead in a long, effortless stride.

Nothing in the canyon escaped the two men as they slipped through the brush, talking only by signs, moving stealthily into the high roughs of Aztec Canyon. Rimrock marvelled at Curt's eyes: he had seen Apache trailers, but Curt was as good as the best. A natural born man-hunter, that's what he was!

Then it was over. They made the capture with almost incredible ease, finding their human quarry asleep on the ground, like an exhausted animal.

The fugitive was a boy about Curt's age, dark-faced, with high cheek bones like an Indian. One ear showed clotted blood. He had traveled fast since starting his flight and looked drawn, beat out.

Curt silently took the sleeping man's rifle and Rimrock his six-shooter. Then they rolled cigarettes, lighted them, and smoked silently for a full minute. It was not until some of the drifting smoke tickled the cowboy's nostrils that he awakened suddenly, sitting bolt upright, reaching frantically for a gun that was no longer there.

Rimrock laughed at the cowboy's shock. "Sleepin' princess," he said, "yore little prince has arrived. Yuh're wanted, son. Jes' a little shootin' trouble."

"Damned if I go," said the cowboy sullenly.

"Yuh shore will be damned if yuh don't," said Rimrock grimly. "Damned with a slug dead center."

"I know you, Britton, an' hate yore bounty-huntin' guts." growled the cowboy. "All yuh're seein' is the money I'm worth to that devil. His son fired at me point-blank; ticked my ear. I won't have a chance if I go back. The sheriff's bunch will end me before I ever come to trial."

"That's yore hard luck, son," grunted Britton. "My job is to hand yuh over to the authorities. If yuh try to run for it now, we got a right to shoot. Yuh belong to the law until yuh're cleared."

THEY dropped down to the next spring and made camp for the night. In the morning Rimrock prepared breakfast while Curt went to bring in their hobbled horses. The prisoner sat meekly on a log, head on his chest. Rimrock gave him a passing glance now and then, but paid him scant attention; the cowboy was plainly too dispirited to attempt flight, and the guns were all out of his reach. Wise to all last-chance pistol-grabbing tricks attempted by desperate captives, Britton wore his own six-shooter in a shoulder holster.

Busy turning the bacon, Britton stiffened and whirled at the crack of a breaking stick behind him. But that telltale sound warned him too late. The youth was already nearly out of sight, fleeing through a hackberry thicket, heading for a slope of tangled brush.

Britton cursed and yanked his gun. "Stop!" he roared, but the cowboy kept running in the desperate hope of making the brush. Once in that tangle, Britton knew it would take a long time and much trouble and risk to hunt him out. Rimrock fired low, intending to hit the fugitive's leg, but just before he fired the cowboy stumbled and fell. The bullet slapped into his body as he went down.

Britton scuffed ahead to where the prisoner lay. He stooped down and turned the man on his back. The cowboy was dead; the shot had torn through his heart, to pass out his chest. Britton's lips compressed. He had never killed unless it was necessary; had not intended to kill now. Yet whatever regrets he had, he put them aside; it was just tough luck for the kid, that was all.

And abruptly Rimrock Britton looked up at the sound of galloping hoofs. Curt, riding bareback, pulled up to stare down at the dead cowboy. A long half minute he stared and then, shaken, glowered accusingly at Rimrock.

"Yuh killed him!" said Curt in a half whisper. "And he said he'd ended that hombre in self-defense—after the other feller shot at him."

"So *he* said," said Rimrock, angered by Curt's tone. "But that's neither here nor there. He run, and I throwed a shot at him. We get the thousand, anyhow, so stop bellyachin'."

"You could have held the shot and we'd of chased him down a-horseback," Curt persisted. "He might of proved himself innocent, for all you know."

Rimrock didn't like the way Curt was looking at him. As if Rimrock was a plain killer; as if he had welcomed a chance to kill the prisoner. All the boy's life, Rimrock had drummed in the boy's head a hatred of all men that stepped outside the law. And now the boy, forgetting all that teaching, was showing sympathy for a man who had forfeited his life by taking another's.

"What's the matter, Curt?" he said harshly. "You goin' to shed tears over him? S'posin' he'd got away and lived to kill some sheriff later. That's our business—seein' that snakes has their fangs drawed. If the operation kills sometimes, that ain't no worry to us."

Curt took a deep breath and looked down at the puncher again. "Count me out of that business," he said, measuring his words slowly. "This looks too much like plain killin' to me. I want none of it. What a man does and what he is I reckon is mostly how he's been raised and the chances he's had. If you'd been a outlaw and raised me with outlaws, I'd been one too."

Britton half opened his mouth to blurt out an angry remark, and then got control of himself by a mighty effort. "I ain't talkin' about it no more," he said trying to avoid a quarrel with his foster-son. "I'm takin' him in."

"And collectin' the reward?" asked Curt softly.

"And collectin' the reward!" rasped Britton. "Why not? By God, youngster, don't forget I paid for yore raisin' and schoolin' outa reward money! And when I die, yuh'll inherit a bunch of money that's all rewards."

"I got no use for that sort of money," said Curt. "I'm through. I'll make a livin' ridin' range."

"Mebbe so," said Britton. "Mebbe I'll let yuh." His face twisted peculiarly. "Blood tells, they say, an' yore blood—"

For a moment a hot quarrel hung between the two. Sheriff Bird had been right. Curt wasn't of the bloodhound breed. He had ideas of his own; sick, sentimental ideas about fugitives from the law. Rage boiled in Britton's heart. Here he had raised a cub who was as good a shot as himself, even faster with a gun, with all the nerve and ability for man-hunting, but with a weak stomach. He would rather Curt had shown signs of cowardice than this childish sympathy for the outlaw class which Rimrock so despised. And yet he could not give up the thought, the hope, that the boy would snap out of it. After all this was the first time Curt had ever seen his foster-father shoot a man down. It was bound to be a shock.... Gruffly he told Curt to go home and do some ranch work.

Rimrock Britton would rather die than admit it, even to himself, but for him the sun rose and set in Curt. The boy was the only living thing he cared about; all the family he had. Hours on end he had spent, since Curt was a button, sitting at night, staring into the dying embers, making great plans for the boy's future, following in his footsteps.

HE arrived at Malapi late at night with a bed tarp over the cowboy's body, and found, waiting with the Media Via sheriff, a beak-nosed, gaunt rancher with ugly little patches of graying hair over his chin. This was George Shaut, father of the man whom Dan Liverance had killed. Shaut grinned crookedly when he saw the lifeless body of the prisoner.

"Rimrock Britton, eh?" he said. "I've heard of you. I'll write a check for the reward." His stubby thumb and forefinger rubbed his gristly goatee, and his eyes looked thoughtfully at Rimrock. "Just happened to think mebbe you'd like more o' the same color coin. I'm settin' on a powder mine down below—some small ranchers hangin' on my flank. They got range I want. I found a flaw in their title, and a court decided for me, but they refuse to move, damn 'em! It's all part of the fight in which my son got killed. I can't afford to start open war, although I got a bunch o' fighters hired. Public opinion in that country is agin' me so strong we'd better keep back news of this Liverance's death for a while. I can put yuh in the way of earning a couple thousand more, Britton, if yuh're willin' to take the risk."

"I don't hire out my guns in any private war," said Rimrock.

"You won't be. I got all the law behind me. Yuh'll be a special deputy. I want those buzzards to open the fight an' I got a scheme for yuh to work on the inside. I'll arrange for yuh to buy one of their ranches with money I furnish. That way yuh kin pretend to be workin' along with 'em, savvy?"

Britton considered it. As long as he had the law behind him he didn't care a hoot about public opinion in the Media Via country. The law was all that mattered.

Britton made a deal with Shaut to take over a small ranch in the middle of Shaut's enemies. He'd take Curt along, let the cub have a taste of real war. Once he tasted burning powder, Curt would soon be seeing things right, heart or no heart!

CHAPTER TWO

Enemy Country

BRITTON returned to his ranch the next evening. Curt had supper ready, coffee, biscuits, venison steak.

"I'm planning a trip into the Media Via Valley country tomorrow," said Britton abruptly as he finished his chuck. "Chance to buy a cow spread cheap, son. Figger to sell it later at a good profit."

Under bushy brows Britton's cold eyes studied Curt, and then almost imperceptably softened. He couldn't let this boy get away from him. Britton had never compromised with anyone, but he would with Curt.

"I'll take yuh in on this fifty-fifty," he went on. "Yore share will buy cows to add to the ones wearin' yore brand. A rough country, that Media Via. Some kind o' cattle war on, that's why the ranch is cheap. Mebbe we'll have to fight. He pushed back his chair. "Well, want to go, son?" Rimrock kept it to himself that this new project was a continuation of the trouble that had sent Dan Liverance fleeing into the Hatchets.

Curt nodded. "I'll go," he said readily.

What he had said to Rimrock was poor return for Britton's raising him, Curt de-

cided to himself. Britton had brought in many desperate killers without reward. A deputy sheriff on cowboy wages, he had once cleaned out an outlaw-ridden country. Rimrock had taught Curt what a treacherous breed outlaws were, but the cowboy killed by Rimrock whose name Curt didn't know, hadn't been that kind. He didn't have the hard, killer's look about him.

Four days later they rode into the cowtown of McNulty's at one end of the Media Via Valley. There Britton found the place was for sale cheap. Without visiting the spread itself he made a deal to buy Folsom's deeded land and his Walking K cattle for cash.

A queer way to buy a outfit Curt thought, sight unseen, and queer also to pay the price before the abstracts had been examined. After the deal was closed, Folsom the former owner, left town on the first stage. The following day, Rimrock and Curt rode out to the new property.

They found Folsom's ranch-house to be a little adobe shack by a waterhole. Folsom had sold everything to Rimrock; saddle horses, furniture, even his blankets, and Rimrock and Curt merely had to take possession. Curt liked the place and his eyes lighted with expectation and hope. This was cow range with hair on its chest. Maybe now Rimrock would be willing to stay here and drop his manhunting for cattle raising.

Three riders dropped by toward evening—neighboring ranchers. One was an old sandy-bearded, little fellow; the other two a pair of young, blond-headed brothers.

"My name's Jakes," said the sandy-whiskered rider. "Own the next ranch east, the one with the windmill. These two is the Kuykendall boys, Guy and Ike. They run their ma's ranch south. We heard yuh bought out Folsom. Not to nose into yore business, did yuh really figger yuh'd bought a cow ranch here?"

Rimrock Britton stood with his big shoulders filling the doorway. "Why not?" He regarded the trio unsmilingly. "Looks like a ranch to me."

"*Looks* like a ranch, yeah," admitted Jakes. "But Folsom's title's no good. This valley goes back to a old Mexican land grant and a skunk name o' Shaut got the grant title throwed out. Bought hisself a judge, like yuh'd buy a cowhorse. Unless we win the appeal we taken in a higher court, we're sunk."

"How many of yuh in this fix?"

"Seven small outfits, all of us bein' poor but honest. Just opposite to this George Shaut, King George, he calls hisself, who's rich and crooked."

"What yuh people aim to do about it?" asked Britton.

"Keep on doin' business at the old stand," said Jakes. "Shaut's runnin' a line o' fence along the valley an' when it's done, the sheriff's shovin' all our stuff out on the desert. We figger for a powder showdown soon. Shaut's done hired him a bunch o' gunmen. This Folsom yuh bought from was the only weak sister among us. He skipped out, after sellin' yuh a fightin' right to his ranch. Our lawyers is guttin' the law books tryin' to git our title declared good, but regardless o' that, we aim to stick."

RIMROCK hunched his shoulders stubbornly. "I paid good money for this ranch. I'd hate to have it stole from me. Where can I find out more about this mess?"

"Tell yuh what, neighbor," said Jakes, "us ranchers is meetin' tonight at my house. Us oldsters will talk, the young 'uns dance. Come over an' git acquainted."

"That invite is right hospitable," said Rimrock. "I don't go in for *bailes* at my age, but Curt here does. I'd like to talk

over land titles and such. If I'm in trouble, I ain't afraid to get my feet wet wadin' out. Me an' my son both."

After they had clattered away, Rimrock got supper on Folsom's rusted range, saying little, angered, the boy thought, because he had been swindled. The whole deal puzzled Curt. He'd thought Rimrock too smart to fall for a bad title.

After dark they dug in their warbags for white shirts and rode to the dance at the Jakes ranch.

Curt mixed with a jolly young crowd, while Rimrock sat in the kitchen talking to the older men-folks. A fine looking lot of people, these Media Via ranchers, Curt thought. They seemed to be laughing in the face of the threat of losing their hard-won homes; dancing a narrow path above a pit of gun-trouble.

Curt danced mostly with one brown-eyed girl, brimful of the health of outdoor life. Her name was Nona Liverance. A smile from her was enough to set Curt's heart to thumping.

Toward midnight the fiddle-accordion orchestra swung into the foot-warming *Old Paint,* and as Curt and Nona moved out the dancers began to sing. A lump came to Curt's throat suddenly. These people had courage, singing as if they meant it, with disaster hanging over their heads. Tomorrow, any day, George Shaut's gun might get into action, and leave half these men dead.

As the music stopped, Curt and Nona Liverance halted in front of a big framed photograph on the wall—a long line of riders, men and women, taken at a local rodeo. Nona was among them, a slim, graceful figure.

She named the people in the line, but skipped one that Curt stared at hard. It wasn't possible, and yet undoubtedly that grinning, happy kid on the palomio was the young fugitive whom Rimrock had killed.

"Who's that?" he asked, pointing.

There was a little catch in Nona's voice. "That—that's my brother Dan. He is not here tonight. A son of George Shaut insulted a girl Dan took to a dance. Young Shaut and my brother went outside. Shaut drew his gun and shot Dan in the ear. Dan was unarmed; he scuffled with Shaut and the gun exploded again. Shaut was killed. There were plenty of witnesses and Dan made a mistake, maybe, in running away. But the sheriff used to be Shaut's foreman, and the judge would polish Shaut's boots. They'd railroad Dan or maybe claim he tried to get away and just kill him. That's why Dan went on the dodge. "Shaut"—her voiced choked—"offered a thousand dollars reward for him!"

They moved out to the music again, and Nona Liverance talked on. Curt wasn't talking; his mouth was too dry. He could only see the cowboy lying with Rimrock's bullet through his heart. . . .

Out in the kitchen Rimrock Britton was talking to Sandy Jakes and Nona's father, a gaunt, mustached rancher named Tull Liverance. It couldn't be that Rimrock —the boy put the ugly suspicion from him, but a moment later he turned to the girl.

"Yuh say Shaut offered a reward for yore brother?"

"A thousand dollars, dead or alive. It wasn't right. The charge could be only manslaughter, at most. But Dan ran away, and they claimed he'd shot Estey Shaut in cold blood." The girl's voice broke suddenly. "Wherever he goes now, he'll be in danger from some skunk bounty-hunter."

Curt's feet kept moving but he didn't know it. He was still back in the Hatchet range looking down at Nona Liverance's brother. She must have felt the strange inner turmoil that seethed in his soul, that made him somehow numb and cold.

Suddenly she asked, "Why, Curt, what's wrong?"

"I was thinking of yore brother," he said slowly. "Of a cowboy who killed the son of a crook and who went on the dodge." The music died away, but his feet still kept moving. And the rest of them smiled because these two young people seemed so occupied with one another that they didn't realize that the music was finished.

As Curt stopped, he looked at Nona Liverance who was smiling up at him again. The girl seemed happy to be within the crook of his arm. She liked him. And he liked her—more than any girl he had ever known. But Rimrock's bullet had killed her brother and Rimrock was now in the kitchen, talking with Liverance, Sandy Jakes and the rest. Rimrock had come in here to buy a ranch. Why? As cover to something else? The startling suspicion came again to Curt. Had Rimrock cooked all this up with Shaut—the purchase of Folsom's ranch and all, so he could come in as spy? Sudden hatred flared up in Curt—for men like King George Shaut, and lawful killers who became their tools.

THE dance broke up long past midnight. The oldsters had settled on their policy: War. They were going to start it soon by cutting Shaut's fence in a whirlwind night ride. Doing that meant giving the sheriff grounds to raise a posse, to make arrests, to join Shaut's gunmen in a bloody range war. The sheriff was their enemy already.

Silently the Brittons rode across the valley through the soft, star-studded night. A few miles from the Folsom ranch Rimrock stopped. Holding up his watch to read it by the moonlight, he shifted his big bulk and spoke to Curt. "I'm ridin' on to see someone. I'll be along toward daylight."

Curt nodded and rode off, but only over the swell of the first hill. Rimrock, he saw, was heading north toward George Shaut's big spread. Curt swung his horse. Now it was the man hunter who was trailed as he rode toward a huge dead pine in a canyon mouth, a natural landmark and a good place for a meeting. Certain that the tree was Rimrock's destination, Curt made a wide circle and slipped into the bushy slope behind it.

Dismounting, he tied his horse and went along a line of red cedars which ran down to the pine. Three horsemen had been waiting at the tree for Rimrock. One of them, talking to Rimrock in a deep, hollow voice, was addressed as Shaut. Curt got close enough to overhear.

Rimrock was coolly reporting the war plans discussed at the dance. Rimrock had been hired as a spy, working on the inside, helping to steal the hard-earned land from the Media Via ranchers. And quite suddenly the world in which Curt had lived as a boy exploded like a rocket. All his life he had admired Rimrock, respected him as he would have respected his own father. No more.

Filled with a cold anger he went back to his horse. Stunned, disheartened, with a growing bitterness eating into his soul, he loped back to the Folsom ranch. When he got there he made coffee and sat up waiting for Rimrock. It was nearly morning when Britton rode in, unsaddled, and came clumping into the house.

CHAPTER THREE

Death for a Spy

RIMROCK BRITTON, looking at his tall blond foster-son, standing grim-faced in the lamplight, knew that a showdown loomed.

"Buyin' a ranch here on a speculation, are yuh?" inquired Curt softly. "Isn't that what you told me, Rimrock?"

"Yeah," said Rimrock. "That's what I told yuh. I was advanced the money to buy this ranch and I git a cool twenty-five hundred dollars when these people that's got no right in this Media Via are forced out."

"Yuh put everything on a money basis, don't yuh? said Curt bitterly. "Includin' blood. Rimrock, figger out what my board and keep set yuh back. I'll give yuh a bill of sale for the cows under my brand in the Hatchets, and if they don't cover, I'll send the money as fast as I earn it."

A white line appeared along Rimrock's heavy jaw. "Set down, kid," he ordered. "We got talk to spill. My mixin' with these ranchers so friendly galls yuh, does it? Yet yuh know well that when I been chasin' outlaws I've often had to pretend to be a cowbuyer or a prospector."

"But you was huntin' murderers or bandits then. This is a plain steal from tail to horns, even if the law does back it. Killin' Dan Liverance ain't enough; you crave to do the Liverances more dirt."

"So that's it?" sneered Rimrock. "I saw how yuh looked at that Liverance girl. Feel sorry for her, eh? Yuh're soft and easy like—yore father. I know: I've told yuh I didn't know who yore father was. I lied, for yore own good. Curt, listen to me. Years ago, a rancher up in the Calderon country turned wolf. Name o' Jim Storm. Claimed the law crooked him outa his outfit, and he went hog-wild. Held up trains an' banks. Had fool ideas too, about helpin' out folks that was pounded down by stronger neighbors. Gave away a lot of the money he stole. Which made some fool people think Jim Storm was a hero. He wasn't. That Jim Storm was yore father, Curt. It's his blood makin' yuh feel sorry for people that's buckin' the law. Lettin' a pretty girl turn yore head."

Curt took one step forward, toward Rimrock. The boy's fists were clenched.

"A girl whose brother brung yuh a thousand dollars," he burst out. "I thought yuh'd only lost yore head, shootin' him, but I know better now. You *wanted* to kill him. Like a kid seein' a runnin' rabbit, yuh opened up on him—to kill! Yuh're a plain killer, Rimrock, workin' from behind a law star! A killer!" He laughed harshly. "Well, I'm proud to hear I'm the son of Jim Storm. From what I've heard of him, he was a fighter who done a heap more good than bad. Outlaw he might o' been, but he was aces to deuces alongside the lawman breed that shot him down."

The story of Jim Storm's end came suddenly to Curt, and a little growl sounded in his throat. "Why *you*—you Rimrock—you was in charge of that posse that killed Jim Storm! Maybe a bullet from yore gun finished him."

"Mebbe," admitted Rimrock coolly. "If so, I only saved him from stretchin' rope. We had him surrounded. It might o' been my bullet—an' that's why, like a damn fool, I felt I ought to take care of his orphan kid."

Curt stood for a full half minute, glaring at Rimrock. But when he spoke his voice was low-pitched, cold. "If so, you ended a better man than you'll ever be."

"I've heard enough!" rasped out Rimrock. "I want no pay for raisin' yuh. Take yore cows and go to hell with 'em. I'm done with a kid that was poisoned with outlaw blood from the start."

Curt looked at the man who had raised him; stared at him from slitted eyes.

"It happens," he said, "I'm not leavin' this country. I'll fight along with Jakes and Liverance if they'll have me. I'll be fightin' out in the open, and so will you mebbe for the first time in yore life!"

Rimrock doubled his fists. "Why, yuh whelp!" he roared. "I'll—"

"You'll—what?" asked Curt softly.

They faced each other, two men who

for over fifteen years had been like father and son, but who suddenly were transformed into deadly enemies.

Rimrock knew he was probably done for if they broke for their guns. He couldn't beat the youngster who had inherited the lightning speed of Jim Storm. Rimrock had never been a fast gunman, but that wouldn't hold him back now. He'd last long enough, by God, to shut the mouth of Jim Storm's son. A killer, was he? All right—he'd prove it! And then Rimrock shivered a little. The muscles of his hands relaxed. He stepped back from the brink of a gun duel with the only human being he had ever loved. His insane anger died within him. He'd back down rather than kill Curt—the kid who was like his own flesh and blood.

The flame of the lamp paled. The first red streaks of morning lay in the sky. Rimrock shifted his feet a little, and his eyes were drawn to the window at Curt's right. Two men stood outside it, Media Via ranchers, with their rifles covering the young fellow.

FROM the front window another pair, the Kuykendall brothers, covered him, Rimrock. The door was shoved open. Smallish Sandy Jakes and tall, lank old Tull Liverance, carrying sawed-off shotguns, stepped in. A few hours before these men had been hospitable neighbors, but now their faces wore a verdict easy to read—death for Rimrock and Curt.

Others crowded in. There was one woman, standing on the fringe of the group; the girl, Nona Liverance.

"Put up yore hands, you Brittons!" ordered Liverance sternly. "Stick 'em up, yuh sneakin' spies!"

Their weapons were taken and the two were marched out into the chill of a thick mist that was creeping over the valley. A rider brought in the horses which had been left in an arroyo back of the house. Sandy Jakes took piggin' twine from his saddled and started to tie the captives.

Nona Liverance looked at Curt as he came out, but he refused to meet her eyes. The slim, pretty girl was shivering, and from something more than cold.

"Mebbe you two would like to know how we got on to yuh," said Liverance. "Right after the dance, a cousin of the Kuykendall boys rode in. He'd been up in the Hatchets where he'd heard you two had caught Dan Liverance. A cowboy saw you two bringin' Dan down outa Aztec Canyon, one afternoon, alive. Where is he now? He ain't been brought to the McNulty's jail. What dirty scheme did you an' Shaut cook up about him before yuh come in to spy for Shaut? If he was turned over to Shaut's sheriff, it's likely he'd never reach McNulty's alive. What'd yuh do with him?"

"Yore son's in a safe place," snarled Rimrock. "That's all I'm sayin'."

Rimrock's hands had not yet been tied. He was standing between two men and not far from Nona Liverance who had pushed up close. Rimrock had been in many desperate places, but none tighter than this. He knew the penalty for spies in a range war, even without Dan Liverance's killing being checked against him. His only hope was to escape, and to effect it he seized upon an old trick.

Catching the ranchers flat-footed, he stepped in to grab Nona Liverance by her shoulders and to spin her around with her body between him and the ranchers' guns. Britton flashed a hidden stingy gun from his waistband, a short-barreled revolver that even Curt did not know he was carrying. Girl and hidden gun gave the bounty-hunter the whip-hand.

"Stand back," he ordered. "Curt, grab a pair of horses. We're ridin'!"

Curt did not move. "You're pullin' out alone, Rimrock," he said. "We done quit ridin' together."

"Damn yuh for a fool!" gritted Britton. "They'll kill yuh!" His gun holding the ranchers at bay, he began to back toward the horses, using Nona Liverance as a shield.

"I'll make yuh a trade, men," Britton told them as he moved back. "Try to stop me an' this girl will likely git hurt by yore shots, and a few of yuh will shore git hurt by my gun. Let me go, an' I'll drop her off in that arroyo unhurt."

"We're the ones who make the trade, Britton," countered Tull Liverance. "We need only one from the pair of yuh. You're goin' to know what it is to have a son facin' death. We'll give yuh until eight o'clock tomorrow mornin' to produce Dan Liverance. If you two ended him, one of yuh pays for it, an' there'll be a hangin' unless yuh bring my boy back—on his feet. It'll be yore son for mine, Britton."

Rimrock made some inarticulate sound as he moved back. Without relaxing his vigilance, he stopped by a horse and exerting his strength, lifted the girl with him into the saddle.

"Until eight tomorrow!" called Liverance grimly, as Rimrock spurred suddenly around the corner of the house. The horse with its double burden dropped out of sight in the arroyo, and a moment later the girl appeared and ran back to them. Then they closed in on Curt.

HEADING toward the mountain range that bordered the valley, the ranchers with Curt, bound and mounted on his own horse, rode into the Liverance ranch. A pleasant, well-kept place it proved to be, located in the mouth of a canyon. Near the house, half-stone, half-frame, sat a small log smokehouse, which was to be Curt's prison.

They pulled him from his saddle. He knew these men; they made the most loyal friends, the deadliest enemies in the world. He could not blame them for the courage to make their own law, to execute what they considered justice. They were his kind of people, he thought, remembering Jim Storm, who had robbed and given to the poor. And because he knew them, he realized that they would hang him as sure as the sun would rise tomorrow.

Nona Liverance's was the only face that showed any pity for him. He and Nona had know each other but a few hours, but those hours had had all the force of long years. Curt wished for only one thing if he had to die: a chance to tell the girl that he had not knowingly come into this country a spy, and that he had had nothing to do with her brother's death.

Twenty-four hours and he'd be taken out and hanged, and Rimrock Britton would have no regrets over that. Rimrock would tell himself that he had tried to raise an outlaw's son to ride the right trail, and that when the boy had turned renegade he had only gotten his just deserts—death at the hands of other renegades.

CHAPTER FOUR

Rope Payoff

THROUGH the dragging hours, penned in his small, dark prison, Curt waited. Against the expertly knotted rawhide about wrists and ankles, he had struggled hopelessly, struggled only because it is nature to fight, even against insuperable odds. They fed him at noon and in the evening—plain chuck, beans, sourdough, coffee, shoved into him by one of the ranchers, and without a word, only an accusing, hate-filled glance.

Night and the ranch settled for sleep. Outside his small prison Curt knew one man was keeping guard. Once there came the quick beat of hoofs into the ranch, the jingle of bit chains. After that Curt

dozed off to sleep until the smokehouse door suddenly creaked open. Chill night air flowed in and he had a glimpse of moonlit yard until someone stepped inside.

A knife blade gleamed dully in a hand of the visitor. He identified the face of his visitor as a soft voice spoke. Nona Liverance! His heart jumped.

The girl set swiftly to work, sawing fast at the rawhide straps on his wrists.

"Why are you doing this, Nona?" he asked.

She did not answer until the last tough strap fell away, leaving his hands free and a little bloody. "Because I don't believe what they say about you, Curt," she said determinedly. "You're no spy, and you wouldn't have hurt Dan. That big man, your father, would, but not you."

As she attacked the rawhide hobbling his ankles, the knife dropped from her trembling grasp. As Curt's stiffened fingers went down to finish the job, their hands met. Hers were warm, small, and for a moment they clung to his.

"Hurry," she urged. "I asked your guard into the house for hot coffee. He won't stay long. Climb over the ridge and head straight north."

Cramped, stiff, he got to his feet and the girl half-guided, half-shoved him outside. A door slammed somewhere and he could hear Nona's sharp intake of breath. "Quick!" she ordered. "While there's time. Run, Curt—around the corner!"

As they slipped to the end wall of the building they heard the guard jingling his spurs out from the house. And then on the side left open for Curt to escape, into the brilliantly moonlighted yard, rode two horsemen.

The guard, walking toward the smokehouse, saw the partly open door and at once yelled at the riders. "Watch sharp, you hombres. He's got out!"

The horsemen whirled to lope toward the smokehouse. Curt realized that the guns of the three covered the yard. He'd risk them, but the guard had run out at an angle and saw the figures in the shadow. He raised his rifle; the gun crashed. The bullet smacked into the log wall above their heads, and then Curt abandoned all attempt at escape. Nona was in equal danger of being hit. He stepped out, hands raised high.

"Don't shoot!" he called. "I'll give up."

Slowly the riders and the guards advanced, guns ready. Lights flashed on in the windows of the ranch-house; voices sounded.

Nona stepped out with Curt, crying softly. "You could have made a run for it," she said in a tense undertone. "You shouldn't have thought of me. Curt, they'll hang you!"

"Mebbe the cards will fall that way," admitted Curt. "But I'm thankin' you, Nona, for believin' in me. That makes it plumb easy—to take whatever comes. Something can happen yet, and if it does, either I stay here or you go with me."

Three men, Nona's father among them, raced, partly dressed, from the house. Now they stood staring and astonished at the girl and Curt. Then the gaunt-faced Tull Liverance stepped closer. "Nona!" he said harshly. "You did this? Go into the house. Stay there. Don't interfere again."

Granite was in his voice. This was real war, and with war's stern, ruthless rules. With dragging steps and a final, tear-filled look back at Curt, the girl went to the house.

THE ranchers worked fast and decisively. In case Shaut's men should try a last minute rescue, they boosted him onto a horse and took him up the canyon. Presently they turned off along on a rocky ledge below a sandstone cliff. At a cave made by a split in the wall, they halted, and unloaded their captive.

When the sun swung above the high range to the east, one of the men looked at his watch. The twenty-four hours were nearly up and no word had come. Sandy Jakes took the lariat from his saddle and began leisurely fashioning a slip-noose.

" 'Bout time to go," he remarked when he had finished. "Best get it over with. Tull said he'd ride right up if any word was sent."

The Kuykendall brothers nodded as the men stiffly got to their feet. Covertly the Kukendalls glanced at the prisoner, saw with relief he was taking it calmly. That was to be expected of Rimrock Britton's son. However much they hated Britton's bounty-hunting tactics, his personal courage was beyond question.

"Back up the canyon," said Jakes tonelessly, "is a tree. A dead pine with a limb one can toss a rope over. Bring the horses, Guy."

Kuykendall nodded, but as he stepped forward a shout echoed against the cliff. They waited tensely while brush crashed in the distance and steel-shod hoofs clicked rapidly along the stony ledge.

It was Tull, all right, but at the rider with him, Curt stared suddenly. He stared straight at Rimrock Britton, whose solid, heavy bulk filled a saddle next to Tull Liverance. The last man Curt had expected to see.

"Catch the other one, too?" asked Sandy Jakes, "that's good. The pine limb is strong enough to hold both!"

"Britton rode into the ranch," reported Liverance. "Gave up his guns: said he had something to spill. I dunno what. We didn't guarantee him no safe conduct back."

"I won't need none," growled Rimrock who had not looked in Curt's direction once. "You are the kind o' buzzards that would go through with a lynchin'."

"You called the turn there," Jakes said grimly. "Somebody dangles sure as hell, unless yuh bring back Dan Liverance alive."

"No chance," rasped out Rimrock. "He got his. Here's how. The sheriff of Brownlee county asked me to ride into the Hatchets for a cowboy named Liverance, wanted for murder. I got him an' was fetchin' him out when he saw his chance to run. The bullet sent after him cut through his heart. If you renegades hang anybody for that, I'm the one due to hang. When it happened, the man you're holdin' was outa camp. Nor he didn't know why we come into the Media Via. That's the truth of it."

"I believe yuh," said Liverance slowly and turned to stare out across the valley. Tull had had scant hope for his son, but Britton's words had hit him hard.

"Yeah it rings like truth," agreed Jakes. "We'll turn this other loose. D'ruther swing yuh for it, anyway. Bounty-hunter Britton," he lifted the noose, "here's a collar, guaranteed to fit any size o' neck."

"Hold on, Sandy!" Tull Liverance still standing, looked out across the valley. The rancher's gaunt, seamed face was grayish as Tull turned toward Rimrock. "I lost my only son," he stated. "And yuh rode in to save yores by takin' his place? Is that it?"

"No," Rimrock snarled promptly. "This ain't my son. He's a whelp of Jim Storm, the outlaw. I raised him thinkin' he'd grow up law-abidin'. He didn't, but I brung him into the Media Via an' I'm seein' he gets out. I'd of led a posse over to turn him loose, but Shaut, the skunk, turned me down on that. He hoped yuh'd hang Curt, to give the sheriff an' Shaut excuse to come in guns a-blazin'."

THE peppery Jakes grinned "If excuse is what they want," he declared, "then by God, they'll have it!" Again he lifted the noose he had fashioned.

"No," said Liverance slowly. "No

hangin' today—even of a damn man-hunter who killed a unarmed prisoner when he could as easily of crippled him. Rimrock Britton's a dirty hired spy, probably a cold-blooded killer, but he rode in to stick his neck in a rope for somebody else's son. Only a man would do that. Let 'em ride outa here together."

"If I ride out, it'll be alone," declared Rimrock harshly. "Jim Storm's son can ride where his outlaw blood takes him. I'm done in the Media Vie. Nothin' would make yuh believe it, Liverance, but I never killed a man in my life, unless I had to—up to yore son. I fired at his legs, but he stumbled and the slug went through his heart as he fell."

"Mebbe I can believe that, too," said Liverance. And with Sandy Jakes growling profanely as he coiled his hang rope, the party returned to the canyon. There they gave back to Curt and Rimrock their guns and, left them free to go where they wanted, and headed in a bunch for the Liverance house.

Rimrock, as he had announced, jogged out alone, and Curt, forced to follow him as far as the canyon mouth, checked his horse to a walk He, too, was leaving the Media Vie, but he'd be coming back, just as soon as he had something to offer the girl he hoped to make his wife.

Out in the open valley, Curt pulled up. Rimrock Britton on his white horse was heading northwest to his ranch in the Hatchets. A hard man but a just man, according to his own standards of duty. Curt owed that oldish man a debt that could not be repaid in cash, but it would have to stay on the books. After this they'd ride separate trails.

Spurring his horse into a swinging lope, he headed for McNulty's on a course a little south of Rimrock's. Then as he crossed a broad arroyo he saw the hoof-mark's of Rimrock's horse before him. Rimrock evidently had changed his mind and had swung to go to McNulty's.

On the crest of the hill beyond, Curt drew up suddenly. Below him the slope broke off abruptly into a shallow little rocky basin. In this, directly below Curt, was a party of mounted men. Britton on his white mount, sat facing them. In the still morning air, the voices drifted up to Curt distinctly—the deep hollow tone of Shaut and the low-pitched but clear one of Rimrock.

"I ain't ridin' with yore crew," Rimrock was declaring. "Not on this job or any other. I done quit."

"Nobody quits me!" bellowed Shaut in a rage. "Yuh take my orders until yo're fired, savvy? I want yore deputy badge on this trip. And yo're totin' it along with us now or I'll kill yuh."

In reply, Britton's guns cleared his holster, tilted toward the rancher. "I go where I damn please, Shaut. No man, if he had a hundred men backin' his play, rides herd on me."

Over twenty riders, all Shaut's hired gunmen, sat behind Shaut. Rimrock had the drop, but he wouldn't last long. No one man can match twenty, yet Rimrock began now to back his horse, still covering Shaut.

So intent had all the men been on the drama between Shaut and Rimrock that no one saw the lone rider above until Curt yelled. Curt, rifle at his shoulder, was standing in his stirrups.

"Got yuh lined up, Shaut!" he called. "Let one of yore men make a move and I'll plug yuh. Ride up this way, Rimrock."

Promptly Rimrock reined over his white horse to climb the steep rocky bank. Shaut's men stirred restlessly, but Shaut snarled at them to wait. Above, Rimrock swung his horse alongside Curt's.

"We'll head back to the Liverance ranch," Rimrock muttered. "That deep arroyo below leads close to it."

AS ONE, the pair whirled their mounts to go thudding down the long slope. Behind them swelled a chorus of torrid yells, and then the loud clatter of a score of horses. The leaders of the mob opened fire as they topped the hill, and the Brittons, still far from the arroyo, swung in their saddles to reply.

Rimrock and Curt had emptied hundreds of cartridge boxes shooting from running horses, practicing as earnestly as the old time Indian scouts. Their first shots now sent two horses somersalting with their riders. That held the rest up until the pair dropped into the arroyo.

"Shaut is jumpin' Liverance and the rest," said Rimrock. "Shaut's title to the Media Via was throwed out in a higher court. They proved he bribed the judge. Shaut's gone loco: aims to wipe out all the ranchers in one raid. Considerin' Liverance turned me loose, it's no more'n right for me to warn him."

In full cry now, Shaut's men poured after them, but Rimrock had chosen his mounts as carefully as he picked his guns. They pounded into the mouth of the Liverance ranch and flashing through the scrub pines, burst into the yard.

All but four of the Media Via Valley ranchers were at the ranch, clustered at the corrals. As they listened gravely to Rimrock's report they could hear Shaut's band racing into the canyon. There were cheers and yells of jubilation as Rimrock panted out the news of the reversal of the court's decision, but outnumbered, and with the canyon mouth blocked if they tried to escape, they realized they might never live to profit by it.

"Yuh better ride on, Rimrock," said Curt. "You can make it over the ridge durin' the excitement. I'm stayin'. They're short four men and I figure to help 'em hold off Shaut's wolves, if they'll have me. I'll join yuh later."

Rimrock Britton looked at Curt and turned to watch Liverance and the rest, busily preparing for the attack. Plainly the manhunter was fighting a conflict with himself. Then, "Join me later, hell!" he growled. "This attack means plain murder. I'm stayin' to fight, too, if they'll have me."

CHAPTER FIVE

Killers' Showdown

THERE in the Liverance stone and frame ranch-house, half hidden in the shrubs and small trees planted by Nona Liverance, the Media Vie Valley ranchers forted up to fight for their lives against a gaunt, rabied range-wolf and his pack. The odds were that the wolf would win.

In a thunder of beating hoofs Shaut's riders raced into the pines below the corrals and dismounted. The ranchers started a retreat to the house; their only hope lay in the solid protection of the ranch-house walls.

Tull Liverance lingered at the corrals to turn out some cattle. The Brittons rode toward him. "Want a pair of volunteers?" inquired Curt. "With some o' yore men gone, yuh may need extra guns."

Liverance's lips closed tight. Curt was all right; he'd be glad to have the boy. Fighting alongside the man who had killed his son was different. Yet they needed help desperately and Rimrock Britton's irons might be enough to swing the odds.

"God knows we can use more guns," said Liverance. "My girl will be takin' chances along with us. All these men got families to go back to, if they go back at all. But I ain't seein'," he addressed Rimrock, *"yore* reason for joinin' us."

Rimrock hesitated. There were various reasons why he wanted to be in this fight: he wanted to stay with Curt and he felt a certain guilt for the killing of Dan Liverance. Rimrock was a man who paid his debts. Knowing Shaut as he did now, Rimrock had to admit that Dan Liverance

should be alive, at home fighting alongside his father.

"Put it this way," said Rimrock. "I've fought with the law all my life. These men are attackin' without legal authority. I'm a deputy sheriff and the only way I can help stop those devils is to fight along with you. If you can use me I'll take yore orders."

Liverance nodded. "I said yuh was a man," he stated briefly. "Turn yore horses loose. We'd best hurry to the house. They'll be here in a minute."

Liverance, oldest of the ranchers, gave the fighting force their stations. Doors had been bolted, windows barricaded.

In the Liverance's small sunny kitchen, bright and spotless as Nona Liverance kept it, Rimrock and Curt stood with shoulders touching, waiting for Shaut. Powder and lead had separated them; powder and lead had brought them together again.

Rimrock cleared his throat. "Curt," he said, "mebbe yuh was partly right about things. Mebbe so was yore father, Jim Storm. The law makes mistakes."

"Mebbe we're all partly wrong, partly right," returned Curt. "I was hot-headed, Rimrock, an' said things I'm sorry for. You never was a killer. You've fought fair against outlaws. You're a square man, Rimrock." And then there was no time for more talk.

SHAUT'S attack started in savage style. His gunmen band had circled the house and now the first guns opened up, and then like a pack of giant firecrackers exploding, every weapon in Shaut's crew got into action.

Bullets hailed in from behind the piles of cord-wood, from the orchard, from cover of the stone walls, from the corrals. Window glass fell crashing, bullets shredded the flapping curtains, whirred viciously through the rooms. By concentrating a deadly fire first on one side, then another, Shaut hoped to maneuver his men close enough for a rush that would bring them into the house itself.

Fifty yards from the kitchen defended by the two Brittons lay a long, natural three-foot barricade made of boulders dragged from the ranch-yard. Behind it half a dozen Shaut fighters had crowded. That reckless bunch learned sudden caution when Curt's rifle sent one of them dropping over the top of the low wall. Another, hit through the chest by Rimrock's Winchester lay flat, cursing and moaning, out of the fight.

That punishment meted out by the Britton's guns checked Shaut on the mountain side, but on the three other fronts his riders bored in, moving closer. Bullets slapped a steady hail against the stone half of the house. At this rate, the battle would be decided one way or another in a few minutes.

Nona Liverance after snatching a moment to greet Curt, had returned to the living room to stay with her father and his neighbor, Sam Charlton, reloading their spare rifles. She had flatly refused to crawl in some safe corner. Every hand was needed.

Tull Liverance, lingering too long at a window, trying to line his sights on a crawling figure, was the first of the Media Via ranchers to be hit. Jerked erect by a bullet that gouged his left shoulder, he stood for a moment an easy target. A second bullet struck a cartridge in his belt, and a third flattening against a hip, sent Liverance back, paralyzed by the shock.

Inexorably the stream of bullets continued; found another victim. In the room next the kitchen, Guy Kuykendall was shot through the throat and fell heavily. Ike Kuykendall, defending the same room went berserk, and stepped before the window roaring a challenge to the killer of his brother.

Curt Britton had heard Guy Kuykendall's fall and had rushed in to investigate. He entered just in time to see Ike Kuykendall at the window. Curt leaped across the room to jerk the crazed young rancher back just before a half dozen bullets whistled in.

Kuykendall tried to shake Curt off. "Damn yuh, let me alone!" he snarled. "I'm goin' to git at least one of 'em—for Guy."

"To hell with gittin' one!" returned Curt. "Take yore time an' git two or three of the polecats." He held the rancher until a little sanity returned, and then he drew a blanket from the bed and covered the still figure on the floor.

"Steady does it," he said to Kuykendall. "They're gittin' ready for a rush. Keep yore gun full and collect plenty pay for Guy when they come."

Hurrying into the living room, he found Nona Liverance with panic in her eyes, but her fingers were steady as she bandaged her father's splintered hip. Looking up at Curt she gave a little cry, pointed at his chest. Curt looked down. In pulling back Ike Kuykendall, Curt himself had been hit. Blood was spreading out from a thin line on his shirt where a bullet had ripped like a knife across his chest. He was aware now that his scraped ribs were flaming with pain, but that had to be forgotten.

THE house was heavy with the odor of burnt powder and the thick black smoke eddied through the rooms. In this dusk Nona and Curt met for an instant. Maybe it was fate that just as his arms closed about her the thunder of the guns faded for an instant. Then they were back in the battle, with that relentless hail of lead pouring in, splintering furniture, pitting walls, flailing all about the defenders.

It looked bad. Half of the men in the house had been hit, were in poor shape to meet the rush that was surely coming. As Curt returned to join Rimrock in the kitchen, Rimrock was muttering uneasily. Shaut had too many men. Then his teeth clamped shut. Hell! There *couldn't* be too many men against fighters like these Media Via riders.

A savage, high-pitched yell came from Shaut. By way of a little ditch to the ranch-yard, he had brought over half his men to the cover of the smokehouse and a nearby shed. This group was close enough to the beleaguered house to chance a rush.

"Here they come!" bawled Sandy Jakes. "Mow 'em down."

A little lull in the rifle thunder, and then Shaut's men broke cover, running in a ragged line, straight toward the house, firing their guns from the hip as they rushed. The Media Via ranchers matched this reckless advance by appearing openly in the windows, staking all on one desperate effort to block the advance.

From his window Curt was unable to fire at the charging men. Racing to the door, he unbolted and flung it open. But before he could step out, Rimrock's powerful arms seized him, snatched him back. Britton had flung down his empty rifle, and now with a six-shooter in each big paw he stepped into the open doorway, placing his big bulk in front of Curt.

"Age before beauty, m'lad!" he bellowed as his guns began to deal roaring death. Curt, unable to get by the big body, had to fire over Rimrock's shoulder. The decision of the battle now was a matter of seconds; once Shaut got inside the line of rancher's fire, he could easily mop up the house. During a few slow-moving seconds the hammering guns of the defenders seemed wasted. Shaut's men came up to the very threshold. And then the whole line wavered, suddenly halted.

As suddenly as it had started, Shaut's crazy charge collapsed. Shaut himself was one of the first to go down; a half

dozen more stumbled and fell, trying to thumb back hammers as they sank.

The few who were left, men with nerve enough to follow Shaut to hell, lacked the courage to go on alone. They turned and fled, and the ranchers with their guns empty let them run. Joined by Shaut's riders who had not been in the rush they disappeared into the trees below the corrals, where they flung themselves on their horses and fled. The echo of their guns died away and a heavy silence descended on the ranch. The battle which had lasted not over five minutes was over.

Three of the four missing Media Via riders, summoned by the loud cannonading, came racing in. They drew up their horses and stared, shocked at the havoc of those few minutes. Bodies lay in a line before the house; from the clearing wounded men were calling for help.

Not one of the fighters in the house had escaped bullet-puncture. Guy Kuykendall and Dick Lancey were dead; and life and death shook dice for Rimrock, Sandy Jakes and Liverance. Four of Shaut's men were picked up from the yard, badly smashed. They and the wounded Media Via ranchers were filling all the available beds when two doctors from McNulty's raced out. Following the doctors came the coroner, the sheriff, and half of the men in the little town.

IT WAS two months before Rimrock, who had placed his big body in the doorway as bullet barricade for the son of Jim Storm, was able to journey back to his ranch in the Hatchets. Rimrock's days of manhunting were over; even without the crippling shots, he had decided the bloody Media Via battle would be his last.

Before he left, Curt and Nona Liverance were married. Curt was to take over the Liverance ranch for old Tull who would never be able to ride again.

When Rimrock Britton left, with Curt and Nona riding a few miles with him, a rain had made the Media Via one great, green, flower-stippled rug. But it would take more than one rain to cover the ugly heaps of earth which appeared after the battle.

Rimrock kissed Nona and shook Curt's hand hard when the time had come for the two to turn back. He and Curt would never quarrel again. They had both learned much in that short war; Curt a new respect for grim officials like Rimrock Britton who risked their lives to enforce the letter of law.

Rimrock had learned respect for such men as Liverance, Jakes and Kuykendalls who have the courage to go outside the law to defend what rightfully belongs to them. And learned, too, that there are better ways of making a living than from blood-money. Rimrock nodded to himself as he rode on alone. It was from the brand of men like those of the Media Via comes a bloody lesson. Before law can be really law, it must be more than mere writing on a statute book.

Rimrock smiled grimly to himself. "Damn it, Curt knew that much all along," he mused. "But we're seein' eye-to-eye now, all right!"

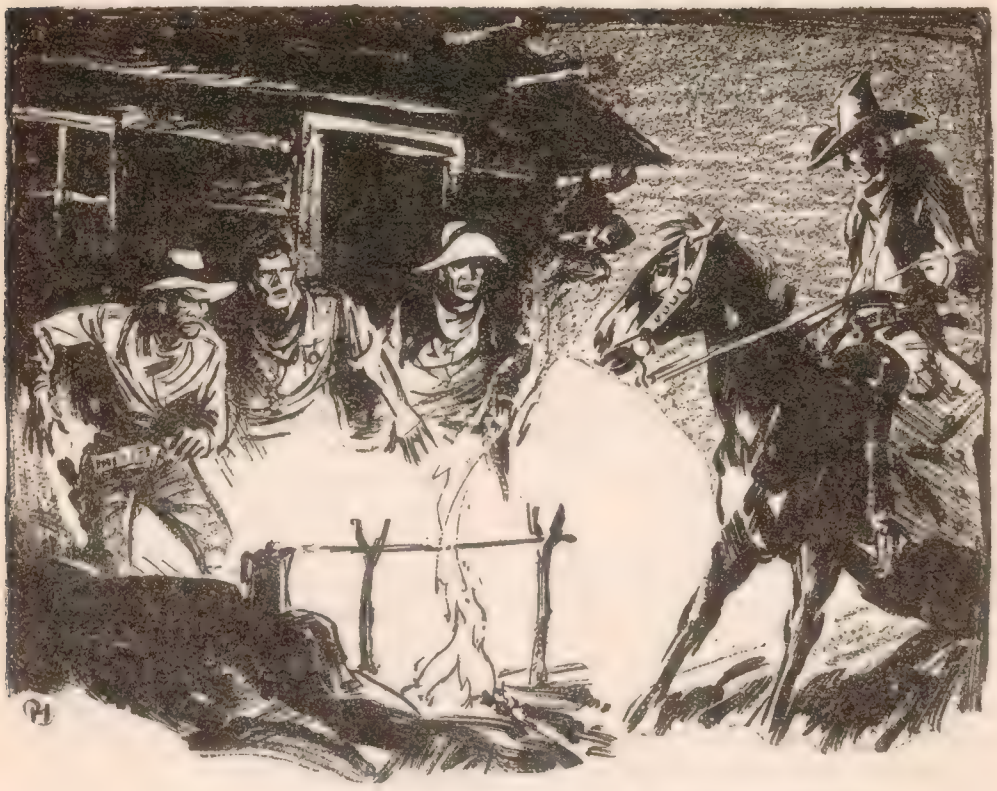
His grin widened. Curt was a kid to be proud of—a real man, who'd be looked up to and liked by others of his own breed!

THE END

DIME WESTERN IS NOW PUBLISHED TWICE A MONTH!

See page 11 for announcement of the first All-Star Semi-Monthly Issue!

Long-Range Posse



by Stewart Van der Veer

A good horse looks a lot better from the other side of the corral—but a posse has to be damned good to look like anything at all a half mile away.

CURT BOYNTON wolf-trotted his roan gelding into Brinker's Gap. One thought beat against his brain. He would avenge Firefly's murder—he would avenge Firefly's murder before he ever closed his eyes in sleep.

Snow sifted against his square anger-flushed face, settled on his wide hat and topped his thrusting shoulders. But he was heedless of the storm.

Coming to the Ox-Yoke Saloon, a flat building of unpainted boards, Boynton slid the roan to a halt, dismounted, led the animal through the snowy darkness into the saloon's rear yard. He stopped suddenly before a shed-like stable. A smoky lantern, moving back and forth in the wind, hung above the door. His quick glance swept the interior of the shelter.

Sharp excitement drove Boynton's heart into a quickened thumping. He recognized the rig. Tom Alto was in the Ox-Yoke! The range bully's blazed sorrel munched hay among the other ponies at the hitching-rack where Boynton tied his horse. Then he crossed the stable, picked up the sorrel's off front foot. Just as he had figured: half of the shoe was gone!

He straightened up, trembling with a fierce, searing anger. His heavy-shouldered, compact body was eager for action, one hundred and eighty pounds of range-tempered bone and muscle. His gray eyes narrowed.

Boynton edged from the stable and into the yard. Through a curtain of falling snow, he regarded the lighted windows of the saloon. As he thought of his dead white mare, rage flared in his heart. He fiddled with the butt of his holstered .38.

Boynton crossed the yard, swung around the building and flung open the front door. Partially blinded by the light, he stamped across the threshold.

The large room, foul with the odor of burning kerosene and thick with tobacco smoke, was crowded. Men lined the long bar, but their backs were turned to the mahogany. They were watching Alto.

The red-haired bully was staging a show, the kind of performance in which he found infinite pleasure. Nobody paid any attention to the entrance of Boynton. All were absorbed, including the fat, fuzzy-pated bartender, in Alto and his latest victim. Beyond the cherry-red stove stood the bully, six-gun in hand. Leaning cooly against the back of a tilted chair was a small, graying stranger.

Boynton saw Alto prod savagely at the little man's ribs with the muzzle of his Colt. "You're goin' to sing a nice song for the boys, feller. Everybody who comes to Brinker's Gap takes a singin' lesson from the professor."

But the little stranger with the graying hair did not flinch. His eyes rested longingly on a rifle standing in the corner then he faced his tormentor. "Singin' ain't my line." The voice was patient, almost amiable.

"Then I'll learn you, you danged sawed-off squirt, or I'll lam hell out of you."

EYES now fully accustomed to the glare of the lamps, Boynton stepped forward. He had glimpsed three hard-faced hombres at the far end of the bar, a trio of Alto's gang. He licked dry lips, curbed the anger which possessed him, for he knew Alto's pluguglies were watching his every move. With luck he might be able to knock down one? Alto . . . but he knew that those three rat-eyed killers would riddle him before he could reach the door. He didn't mind playing a game where he had a bare chance, but only a fool went up against hopeless odds. And yet he couldn't stand here and see this gritty little old man pistol-whipped.

Boynton asked, calmly enough:

"What's the ruckus?"

Alto, a lock of red hair falling across his narrow forehead, turned his hawk-like face toward the rancher. He started to answer, but the stranger interrupted:

"Maybe I better do the talkin'." The corners of his thin-lipped mouth drooped and leathery cheeks crinkled. "Drifted in here out of the storm." He addressed Boynton, motioned in the direction of the amazed Alto. "Your big friend . . ."

The rancher broke in crisply. "No friend of mine. Lookin' for him myself and I never aimed to shake hands when we met. He shot my best mare today."

Alto, gin-fuddled and speechless with amazement, toyed with his Colt. Men along the bar shuffled nervously. The three pluguglies watched their chief.

The little man's black eyes were like twin gimlets. They bored into Alto. "Shot a mare, eh! Reckon he'd do a dirty trick like that. Anyhow, I was settin' back of the stove, thawin' out my old bones. That big red-maned jackass got it into his head I might do some singing' . . . and I don't sing wuth a dang."

Alto was coming out of his brain-fog. He swayed toward Boynton, waving his six-gun. "Ain't seein' that this little cir-

cus is your business, Boynton," he mouthed.

Boynton felt the bully's gin-laden breath on his cheek. He stood his ground, eyeing that glowering trio at the bar. To draw meant certain death. His only way out was in bluffing through the crisis. Looking into the weaving muzzle of Alto's six-gun, he laughed, shrugged his shoulders, but the blood was prickling the skin at the back of his neck. And as he laughed an amazed, incredulous look came into Alto's eyes. His gun wavered aside for one instant.

Beyond Alto, Boynton saw the little stranger watching him with gray, half surly eyes. Boynton said, voice taut:

"Get your gun, old-timer. Let's shag out of this. Alto and me have plenty to settle . . . later on." He shot a lightning glance at the alert trio. "Mebbe sometime Alto will lose his bodyguard."

The old man darted to the corner, snatched up his rifle. Shoulder to shoulder, he and Boynton backed to the door, kicked it open. They eased out into the night, felt the snow upon their hot faces.

"So you're Boynton?"

"Yep, Curt Boynton."

There was a throaty chuckle in the darkness. "Well, I'm danged!"

Inside the saloon voices hummed. Feet shuffled upon the floor. Boynton pushed the old man behind him, faced the door. He heard Alto, recovered from his surprise and infuriated beyond all caution, lunge across the floor. All at once the bully stood silhoutted against the yellow light from the lamps.

"Stick near the stove, Alto," warned Boynton from the heavy gloom of the yard. His voice was as cold as the wind-driven snow. "It'll be rough out tonight!"

The bully stepped back, slammed the saloon door.

Boynton grasped his companion by the shoulder, pushed him through the darkness toward the shed. "My horse is big . . . he'll carry double. Alto ain't the type to take a lickin' layin' down."

"Got far to go?"

The rancher was unhitching the roan. "It's three miles across the Tallassee flats to my place. Say, what's your name?"

"Nate."

Boynton vaulted into the saddle. "Get a wiggle on and climb up behind me."

MINUTES later Boynton drew rein at a gate which opened into the stable yard of the O-Bar-O. "Here we are," he said. Nate slid stiffly to the snow, swung the gate. The rancher rode through, dismounted. He unsaddled, put the steaming horse into the stable.

They passed through the darkened kitchen and into the front room. A tiny flame glowed in the fireplace. Through the window, they could see the boat-shaped moon drift from behind the clouds. The snow storm was breaking up. Boynton added wood to the fire. Nate instinctively took his post by the window, leaning on his rifle, sentinel-like in the silvered moonlight.

"Judgin' you and this red-head ain't very friendly," he ventured.

Boynton's strong teeth clicked like a trap. "Friendly! He's swore to run me off the Tallassee . . . him and his gang."

Nate was lighting a stubby, blackened pipe. "Why?" he asked.

Boynton squatted on the hearth. He took out a cigarette, knocked it against his thumbnail. "A girl."

"You see, I ain't lived here in Wyoming long. Come out here from Kentucky, bought this place and a few hundred longhorns. Old Zeb Miller owns the spread next to mine. He's the father of Marianna, and there ain't a whiter man on the Tallassee. But Zeb's crippled, spends most of his time in a wheel chair."

Nate puffed on his pipe. "Marianna's the girl, I take it?"

"Sure," said Boynton, "and that's what

has got into that red hair of Tom Alto's. Since Marianna's been goin' with me, he's been on the loose."

Nate observed sagely, "A woman sure can tangle things."

Boynton smiled, flipped his cigarette into the fire. "I'm plumb willin' to be tangled up about that girl. She's the prettiest thing in the state. One of the soft, yellow-haired kind with eyes like a September sky and . . . well, there ain't nobody else for me in this world and I know it. Lissen . . ."

Nate coughed impatiently, drummed the butt of his rifle on the floor. "What you think Alto's goin' to do?" he demanded.

BOYNTON changed the subject reluctantly. "Ain't no tellin'. He and his gang have done about everything to drive me off the Tallassee. They've burned my haystacks, poisoned my waterholes and run off my cows, two and three at a time. I've an idea they been takin' the critters to an outlaw slaughter house over in the Shoshone Indian country."

Boynton straightened up, spun the cylinder of his .38. His voice was bleak with discouragement. "Here 'bout a week ago I got kind of desperate, wrote dad a letter. He used to be warden of the penitentiary back in Kentucky. Reckon I was hopin' mebbe he'd come out here and lend a hand. Oughtn't to done it . . . dad's gettin' old." He stretched, yawned. "We better take turns standin' guard."

"Bed down first," suggested the old man, a queer look in his eye.

A wave of suspicion swept over the young rancher. Could this be another of Alto's dirty tricks? Had the bully staged the scene in the Ox-Yoke? Perhaps, even now, back in Brinker's Gap, men were standing at the bar, laughing at his expense. Maybe the gang leader had stationed a look-out to announce Boynton's arrival in town. Maybe the whole business in the saloon had been a put-up job. One suspicion after another whipped across the rancher's excited brain. Maybe Nate was here to kill him!

Nate smiled. "Go on," he drawled. "Hole up for a spell."

But Boynton could not beat down his suspicions. He glanced at Nate with narrowed eyes. "I'll take the first watch," he declared. "In the back room you'll find blankets. Get them, stretch out here in front of the fire."

Nate surprised him. "Be proud to, boy," he replied with an unexpected eagerness. He yawned. "Wore to a nub, I am."

JUST as dawn was creeping across the snow, Boynton saw a lone rider approaching from the direction of Zeb Miller's place. Nearer came the horseman. Then a short, bow-legged waddy vaulted from the saddle to the house. Boynton recognized Polk Lanahan, one of Miller's riders, a nubbin of a man with a drooping mustache. He opened the door:

"Whats' ailin' you, Lanahan?"

Lanahan halted on the lower step of the porch. His breathed was like steam in the winter air. Icicles clung to his mustache. "Old man Miller says for you to come humpin'. Marianna's gone. Took out'n her room sometime durin' the night!"

Boynton charged out upon the porch, then down the steps. He grasped Lanahan by the shoulder and his fingers bit deep into the flesh. "It's too early for jokes, feller," he gritted.

"True, so help me!" exclaimed Lanahan.

The rancher's red-rimmed, sleepless eyes blinked in the early morning light. Then he exploded. "How you know she was taken?" he demanded.

"Boot tracks in the snow under her window," replied Lanahan.

Boynton pushed on with his questions.

"Miller's got seven riders. Where were they?"

Lanahan stepped back, startled by the aroused rancher's vehemence. "Bunk house was empty," he explained. "Every man rode to town late, spent most of the night there."

Boynton's imagination was twisting at his brain as he thought of Alto. If that low-down skunk had dared to lay a hand on Marianna! A vision of his girl being pawed by that swaggering bully drove him near to madness. He'd track Alto to the border line of hell. Alto! Of course it was Alto. Nobody else on the Tallassee would stoop to such deviltry.

Boynton pushed Lanahan toward the gate. His voice cracked like the lash of a curling bull-whip. "Tell Miller I'm on my way." He turned back into the house. Suspicions of Nate were forgotten with this new development as he shook the old man into consciousness. "Pick it up," he ordered, "we're ridin'."

Nate passed a gnarled hand across his sleep-heavy eyes. "What's goin' on?"

Boynton snapped over his shoulder: "That girl I was tellin' you about—she's been kidnaped!"

BOYNTON bent low in his saddle, gray gaze on Lanahan speeding across the snow toward Miller's place. The three men rode in silence for a half mile, then Boynton jerked the animal to a halt in a swirl of snow. "Look at that!" He pointed to a broad trail leading across the flats. "It means my critters are gone. They spend bad nights in that valley over yonder. The pines make a wind-break. They wouldn't have stirred this early 'less they was driven." Boynton's spurs raked the bay's flanks. . . .

Zeb Miller rolled his chair to the edge of the porch as the two men rode into the ranch yard. A vari-colored Indian blanket was spread across his knees. Emotion twisted his round, florid face. "Tom Alto done this to me!" he bellowed. The cords surged beneath the pinkish skin of his column-like neck.

Boynton dragged his bay to a halt at the porch. "Where's your riders?"

Miller pounded the chair arm with his hairy fist. He glanced toward the bunk house, snorted with disgust. "Got in from town, but they're cock-eyed drunk, the lot of them. It's up to you, Boynton. Me crippled like a hamstrung horse and . . ."

Boynton leaned forward across the pommel of his saddle. "We'll leave Lanahan here to sober your outfit. They can pick up our trail later. We'll be needin' them."

Lanahan, who had disappeared toward the stable came bow-legging across the yard on the run. "Boynton," he said, "near the corral there's the fresh tracks of three horses! All our saddle stock's in the stalls."

"I'll take a look," said Boynton. He dismounted, leaving Nate to tend the bay. Hurriedly he crossed the yard at Lanahan's heels.

Three horses had been tied to the corral fence. Boynton dropped to his knees, studied the hoof prints. His heart raced. His gray eyes blazed. There, in the snow, was the unmistakable mark of a broken shoe: Alto's sorrel!

The departing tracks led due west. Boynton savvied the whole deal now. He was certain of it. The range bully had figured to make this his last big play on the Tallassee. He would head across the flats, then up and over Stony Lonesome and down the long slope into the Shoshone country. While Alto and two companions had been kidnapping the girl, others of the gang had been running off the cattle. Now, doubtless, the two parties had united. Somewhere, across that great carpet of snow, Alto was making away with Boynton's girl and his cattle.

TEN minutes later, with Nate forking a roan beside him, Boynton thundered across the prairie. He rode, grimly silent, eyes reading that tale in the snow. Topping a rise, two miles from Miller's he halted abruptly. In the shallow depression ahead was the trail of his stolen cattle. And the tracks of the three horses, the trail he had been following, blended into the wide beaten pathway!

Boynton knew that in riding openly along the trail, he was defying death from ambush. But every minute now was precious. He motioned to the taciturn Nate, dragged spurs beneath the flanks of the bay. He could hear the drumming of the dun pony in his wake. Westward, toward the high country, swung the flattened pathway in the snow.

Three miles further and the riders were in the pine-covered hills which squatted at the foot of Stony Lonesome, a jagged, saw-toothed range with one path leading across its rocky summit. Boynton drew rein, swung off his horse.

Thoughtfully the cattleman watched Nate slide to the snow. The little old man grinned, drawled in his good-natured voice: "Fightin' 'mongst pine trees is in my line, son."

Boynton tied his pony to a limb. "We'll go forward on foot for a spell," he said quickly. He watched impatiently as Nate made his pony fast to a tree. Nothing seemed to fluster the owner of the long rifle.

Nate brushed a bead of moisture from the tip of his nose. "Take things as they come . . . that's me."

Their horses well hidden among the trees, the two men advanced. Boynton pointed. "Yonder's the beginnin' of the path across Stony Lonesome," he said.

Two immense stones, like pillars, marked the steep ascent. Between the markers, the snow had been packed by the plodding hoofs of the cattle.

Boynton led the way rapidly, but warily. All at once a feeling of apprehension swept over him. He darted behind a low pine, pulled Nate after him, and they crouched in the snow, shoulders touching.

Boynton's heart was hammering against his ribs. "Got a hunch there's men behind those rocks," he whispered. He felt a relief that the hour for real action had arrived. But this was losing time, valuable time. If there was a rear guard, it must be got out of the way without further delay. Nothing, however, would be gained by advancing into a death trap. He wracked his brain. Suddenly he turned to Nate. "Got a crazy plan, but it might work," he said excitedly. "How good are you with that rifle?"

"Hit what I aim at most generally."

The cattleman's square, wind-swept face twisted. "Then listen to this: We haven't a minute to lose battlin' a rear guard. We got to out-smart the skunks. Here's how we're goin' to do it, I'm danged certain men are behind those rocks. Only way we can find out for sure is to draw their fire. That's what I'm goin' to do."

"How, feller?"

"It'll be easy," explained Boynton. "Chances are those hombres haven't anything but six-guns. I'm goin' forward to see. Know soon enough because they'll sure start poppin' off before I'm in range. I'll make them think they hit me. Mebbe that trick will bring them from cover. After that, you and that rifle can take care of them proper."

"We sure can," declared Nate confidently. "Only get them in the clear, son. But, lissen, s'pose they've got far-shootin' guns, carbines or such like?"

Boynton's gray eyes were hard as flint. He knew what he was about to do. "A gamble I'm takin'," he said. It wasn't going to be easy, this acting the part of a decoy, but it was the best way to save

time. If a real gun-fight started, it might take hours to dislodge Alto's rear guard. And all that time, the bully would be pushing on toward comparative safety. "See that you shoot quick . . . and straight," he told the old man squatting in the snow.

SLOWLY he advanced, hand resting on the butt of his thirty-eight. He was within a hundred and fifty yards of the trail markers when the report of a six-gun cracked the still mountain air. A bullet whined, fell short, kicked up snow. Another shot came from behind the boulders. Alto's rear guard was getting panicky. Two more bullets whined down the trail. Boynton paused, doubled up, sank into the snow. But from beneath his raised elbow, he saw a man charge from behind the marker on the right. Boynton, unharmed, held his fire. He was counting on Nate. He had only an instant to wait. There was the sharp crack of the rifle and the dry-gulcher swayed, pitched into a gully.

A second man now broke cover, ran frantically up the steep mountain. Slipping and sliding he struggled to make the elbow in the trail. Boynton felt a momentary pity for the panic-stricken, doomed fugitive. But Nate apparently had no scruples. Again the rifle whanged sharply. The fleeing outlaw halted, balanced a moment, then fell backward.

Boynton got to his feet. He shouted to Nate, saw him ease out from behind the pine.

"Hurt?" called the old fellow, advancing at a trot.

"Never touched me."

There was a relieved expression on Nate's face as he stood beside Boynton, "Want me to go back after the horses?"

"No. It'll take time. Those bullies must have had ponies cached hereabouts. They won't be needin' them any more."

"Up the incline, among some cedars, they found the horses of the dead men. One was a piebald, the other a chestnut with a taffy-colored mane and tail. "Here's luck," said Boynton. "We'll take these circus plugs and ride right into the gang before we're recognized. Alto will think we're his own men."

It was a long drag to the crest of Stony Lonesome. The horses slipped and stumbled up the incline. The purpling shadows of late afternoon were lengthening when Boynton and Nate topped the ridge which marked the crest of the saw-toothed range.

Boynton, on the dead rustler's piebald, was in the lead. He reined in his horse. He spoke out of the corner of his mouth: "Stay out of sight, Nate. They're down the far slope, restin' the critters. I'm spotted, but they can't see you."

For the first time showing a trace of excitement in his drawling, amiable voice, Nate asked: "What's goin' on?"

Boynton, certain he would not be recognized on the piebald, slouched carelessly in his saddle. He studied the situation, talking meanwhile to Nate. "The cattle are herded into a shallow draw. Four men are squattin' by a fire, eatin'! There's a cabin with smoke comin' from the chimney. Marianna's in there, I'm thinkin'."

Nate, eager as a terrier now, stepped off his horse, wormed his way to a place behind a snow-covered bush on the crest. He surveyed the scene below him. "Lemme pick them off!" he begged. The butt of his rifle was snuggling into the hollow of his shoulder.

"Put it down!" ordered Boynton. "I'm takin' Alto back to face the law. Rustlin' and kidnappin' can bring pretty stiff sentences. Be worse than just plain killin', I reckon."

"How you aim to do it?" demanded the disappointed Nate from behind his bush.

Boynton countered: "Can you hit that coffee pot on the fire?"

"You seen a sample of my shootin' back

yonder at the foot of the mountain," declared Nate. "Now I can't be so sure. It's darkenin' up."

The rancher straightened in his saddle. He squared his heavy shoulders, tightened on the piebald's reins. He turned a determined face toward the old man kneeling in the snow. "Nate," he said, "I'm runnin' a bluff . . . a big bluff. Mebbe it won't work, but I'm goin' to count on you to do your share."

"What crazy stunt. . . ."

Boynton interrupted. "You and that rifle of yours are a posse. I'm goin' to ride down there and bluff those mangy coyotes. I'm tellin' them they're covered from the ridge."

"Sort of a long range posse," smiled Nate.

"Lissen, feller," Boynton went on, "I may need proof. Can you hit that coffee pot on the fire?" he asked a second time."

Nate frowned. "In daylight," he said, "I could trim off the handle, but shadders make bad shootin'. I'll try, son . . ."

"Good," declared Boynton crisply. "When I raise my hand, drill a hole in that pot, understand?"

"Sure, but I think you're a plain danged. . . ."

BOYNTON didn't hear the end of the sentence. He was riding down the slope. Outwardly he looked like a lazy puncher lolling on the back of a piebald pony. But inside he was troubled by a thousand little darts of fear. One man against four! And a certain vicious courage characterized Alto. Boynton thought of Marianna. He knew that inside of five minutes she would be in his arms, or else his arms would be slack . . . in death. A grim determination flowed into him. He wouldn't die. He couldn't! He'd never leave Marianna to the mercy of Alto. Maybe it would have been better to let Nate open up with his rifle. No, he'd take Alto and his men back to Brinker's Gap, make them face the shame of a court trial for kidnapping. He eased down the slope, counting on surprise and quick talking to get the upper hand. Boynton was within fifty yards of the quartet before he was recognized.

Alto, squatting before the fire, lunged to his feet. Big hands swept to the twin guns at his belt. Feet spread far apart, the kidnapper watched the rancher's advance. With three companions, Alto apparently thought he had little to fear from this lone horseman.

Boynton reined in his piebald.

"My posse's on the ridge . . . you're covered! First man to move gets lead in his belly."

"Yeah!" flung back Alto.

Boynton found himself hoping Nate could duplicate his good shooting with the rifle. "Where's Marianna?" he demanded, and his voice rang with a fierce anger.

Alto, bare-headed, tossed red hair back from his forehead. "Find out!" he shouted insolently. He glanced at his companions, hands poised above their holsters. "If you want to gun-smoke it out, now's the time to start."

Boynton knew better than to draw. He wouldn't have a chance. "So's that's your play," he said. "You ain't puttin' much stock in my posse. I'll give you proof. Watch!" He raised his hand. The coffee pot jumped and, squirting an amber stream, spun from the fire. The sharp wham of a rifle echoed among the rocks of Stony Lonesome.

A subdued gasp of surprise broke from the bully's lips. Then rage swept across his hawk-like face. Alto was no coward. He whipped out his six-gun. In the deepening twilight, it belched an orange flame. Boynton felt a stab of pain as a bullet creased his shoulder. His hand darted to the butt of his thirty-eight. The gun came out of its holster, smoking, slinging

lead. A slug ripped into Alto's arm, spinning his weapon into the ashes of the fire. The bully flung himself behind a pine log. "Shoot, you fools!" he shouted at his surprised companions.

Then the air seemed filled with whining lead. Boynton felt the piebald collapse beneath him. He sheltered himself behind the animal's prostrate body.

WHAM! Nate's rifle spoke from the ridge. One of the rustlers crumpled to his knees, dying. *Wham!* Another squealed in agony as he clasped a shattered knee. The third member of Alto's followers dropped his gun, flung himself behind the log alongside his chief.

"Got enough?" called Boynton.

Alto was whining now. "We ain't fightin' men we can't see."

The rancher got to his feet. "Then crawl out." He stood beside the piebald, arms folded. He waited till the bully and his uninjured follower ranged themselves behind the two men upon the ground, then he turned and looked toward the ridge. Nate, his rifle resting across the pommel of his saddle, was riding down the steep slope.

Alto muttered, "It's that measly little stranger . . . alone."

When Nate arrived on the scene, Boynton ordered crisply: "Keep them covered."

"Sure."

Boynton ran to the cabin. His heart was pounding. "Marianna!" he cried, "Marianna!" A figure rushed toward him through the purpling dusk, a girl with blue eyes and cascading blonde hair.

"Curt! I knew you'd come."

Boynton had never heard music half so sweet as that relieved voice. His arms went about Marianna. A wave of tenderness engulfed him. "Course you did, honey." He felt her slim body tremble against him. There, in the semi-darkness of that mountain cabin, he kissed her.

Then, his arm about her shoulder, they went outdoors. Nate was slumped lazily in his saddle, but watching the prisoners with alert eyes.

Marianna shuddered as she saw the dead man beside the fire. Nearby was the surly Alto and his two henchmen, one moaning over his battered knee. "Who's the stranger on horseback?" she asked.

Nate overheard the question. His face wrinkled into a smile. "Mebbe I better tell you, Miss. Curt wouldn't know. He wrote home to his paw, said he was needin' help. Old man Boynton sent me out here to Wyoming, wasn't able to come hisself. Curt's been callin' me Nate, but my full name is Nathaniel Fink."

"Nathaniel Fink!" exclaimed Boynton. "Not the famous feudist from Breathitt County, Kentucky?"

Fink, without relaxing his vigil, said: "Yep, that's me. I was in the penitentiary when your paw was warden. Him and me got to be friends. When he heard you needed help he got me a parole. Reckon now that things are cleaned up, I'll be moseyin' back to finish my time."

"Not if my dad can help it," promised Boynton. "Marianna and me will still be needin' help . . . on the O-Bar-O. He looked at the girl and happiness flooded into his gray eyes.

Fink's gaze was on the prisoners. "Reckon we better get these varmints tied up for safe delivery back in Brinker's Gap." Then he looked almost apologetically at the dead man. "Today's the first time I ever killed a feller whose name wasn't Jett. Lemme see, two back yonder at the foot of the mountain and this one here . . . that ain't so bad, Boynton."

When Lanahan arrived at the head of Miller's sobered riders, Nathaniel Fink, of Breathitt County, Kentucky, was adding three notches to the seven already cut in the stock of his long rifle.

by CLIFF FARRELL

(Author of "Blizzard Bluff," etc.)

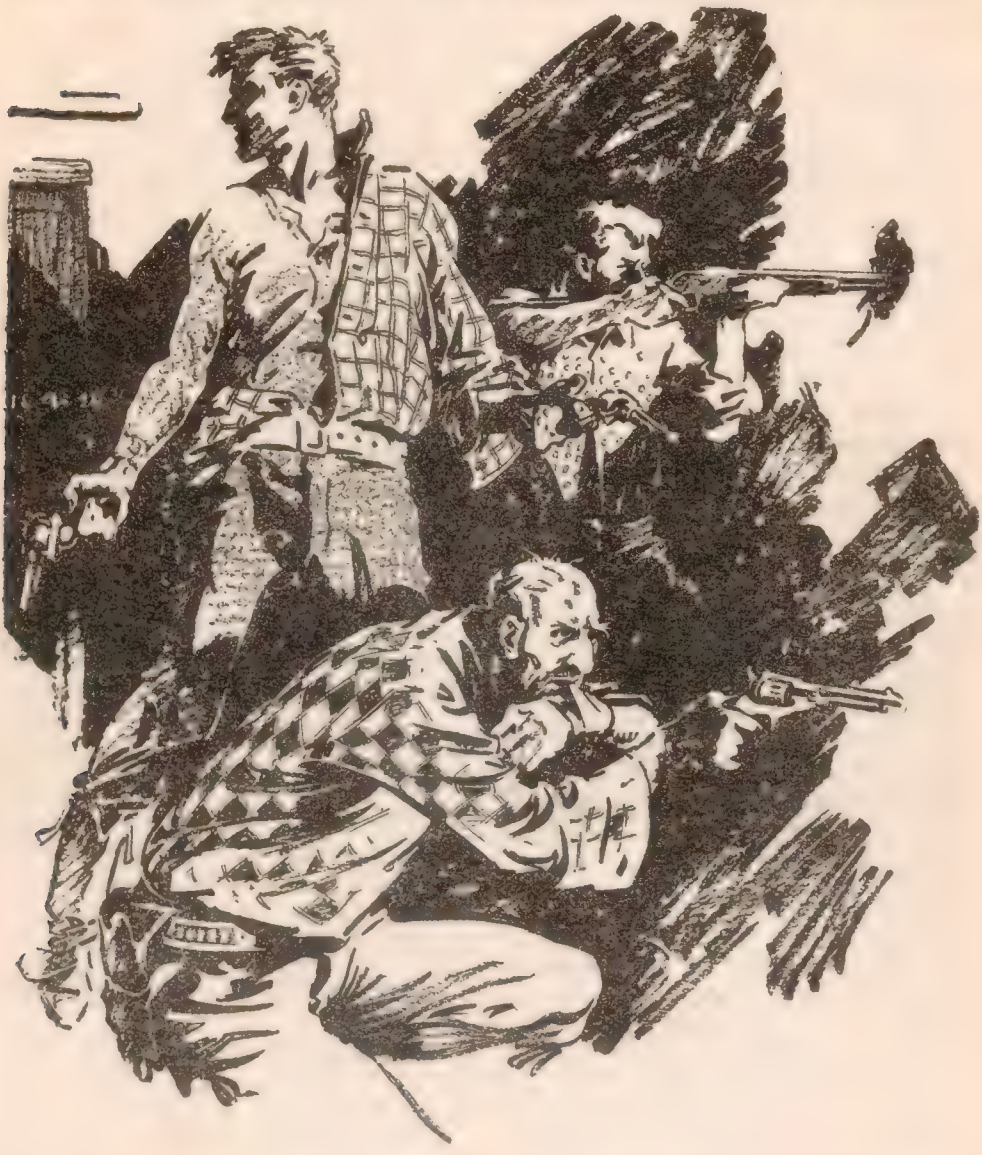
Killers—

Each had a bullet with the other's name engraved deep in its soft nose. Yet old blood scores must sometimes wait when an outside lobo threat makes common call on gunman's courage.

RING BRISCOE'S cool eyes did not betray the sudden surge of elation that swept over him. Fifteen years of self-discipline prepares a man, hardens him against shock. Now, at the end of his long search, with one of his father's killers standing before him, he was actually smiling. He gave no

Back to Back!

Novelette of Lawless Riders



hint of the volcanic fires that were unleashed by the announcement of his companion. And Manch Tyson did not know that the few words he'd spoken would probably shorten his life to a matter of minutes.

Ring was casual. "Whose place did you say? Torch Turnbull's? You don't mean the old-time gun pusher?"

Manch Tyson winked importantly. Tyson was a dozen years older than Ring, with the brand of hard years stamped indelibly on him. He had no real intelligence, merely a single-track animal-like type of mind. A shallow pretence of secrecy, of entertaining sinister knowledge, was his stock method of impressing others. But, having never been able to im-

press Ring, he held hidden rancor, though he and Ring spent two dangerous years together as longriders.

"Yeah, that's Torch's ranch," Tyson said boastfully. "The old curly wolf himself. They never come saltier than he was. But he don't carry that brand any more. He throwed off the gun trail years ago. He packs another name now—his real handle, I reckon. Me an' him used to hell around together, before he went soft."

Ring sighted into the wavering haze of distance. He and Tyson, on trail-worn horses, had mounted the Saddlebacks from the south. Now, from the caprock, Whirlwind Valley, a cattle paradise spread away to the north below them. In the foreground, but still a good ten miles in an air-line, was a ranch cupped in an ox-bow bend of Whirlwind Creek. A town lay somewhere north, lost in the shimmer of the violet horizon.

So Torch Turnbull, the killer, had gone soft. Well, a man like Turnbull could soften plenty and still be mighty hard to cut down. Before sunset Ring aimed to try it on with Turnbull. He had spent the greater part of fifteen years hunting Turnbull. And now he was to have his chance to even the old score.

But first he meant to put an end to Manch Tyson's useless, treacherous, crooked career. He had endured Tyson for two years, even rode the hootowl trails with him. It had been hard to stomach such a human misfit—but Manch Tyson was the only man in the world Ring had picked to uncover Torch Turnbull. So Ring had ridden with Manch—and now Tyson had led him to Turnbull. . . .

"Torch'll put us up for a few days until we get the saddle burrs picked off us," Tyson said. "When we ramble he'll give us somethin' to put between our knees better than these crowbaits. We need a lay-over."

RING and Tyson were three hard-riding weeks north of stamping grounds that had started to sizzle beneath them. They were flat-broke, trail-scarred, down at the heel, belts pinching into lean bellies—the reward of outlawry. They needed food, rest and fast horses.

"If he's quit the gun-trail he likely won't be so happy to see you again," Ring pointed out. "What then?"

"He'll talk turkey," Tyson scowled. "I know too much about him. Come on, Sims. Let's get movin' down the hill."

Sims was the name by which Tyson knew Ring—Buck Sims—it was not safe to give out his own name.

Ring did not stir his horse. Instead, he hipped around slightly to look squarely at Tyson. "I'm goin' down alone, Tyson," he said. "You're staying here."

Tyson's uncombed head jerked up. Tyson had followed the danger trail all his life. His perceptions of peril were accordingly acute. His brain drummed a vivid warning. All the doubts of his companion that had occurred to him at odd times during their two years of association, suddenly reared up like a tidal wave in his mind. His beady eyes measured Ring from a sudden, new aspect. Slowly his squatty body tightened.

"Come again," he growled. "I don't get you."

Both wore gun-braces. Ring had seen Tyson in action and knew him as fast, deadly, with plenty of experience in shoot-outs. Ring had no assurance that he could outspeed even Tyson, let alone Torch Turnbull.

"My name isn't Sims," Ring explained softly, their eyes riveting. "It's Briscoe. Ring Briscoe. Ever hear of it, Tyson?"

Tyson's thick lips twitched. The muscles began to bunch and whiten on his cheekbones. "I see you *do* recollect," Ring intoned, the clang of steel lifting in his

voice. "I reckon you recall a day fifteen years ago when Torch Turnbull and his pack of misery-dealers thought they had wiped out all of the Rocking B Briscoes down in the Panhandle. You were one of them, Tyson. They killed my father and three brothers. *You* gave one of my brothers the finishing slug . . . when he was already down and dying." Ring paused. "Worse than that you wolves killed my mother," he grated. "She was in the ranch house, too. That's the main reason why I'm goin' to snuff you, Tyson." Ring's voice was cold, his eyes blazed deeply, and as Tyson looked into them he felt the truth of the challenge.

Tyson twisted aside in the saddle . . . his gun came up smoking. Ring anticipated that. His hand streaked down the instant he caught the flash of advance warning in Tyson's eyes. His palm cracked on the black handle. He flipped it and fired with oily smoothness.

He won first pull on the trigger . . . they were hardly an arm's length apart. He felt Tyson's bullet fan his cheek. Powder stung his face. But Tyson, with a sick gurgle on red-flecked lips, sagged from his startled horse. A spur hung up in the rigging, and he was dragged a rod before the boot slipped from his leg.

Ring, his horse curveting, swung his sights on the gross body. But he did not fire again. It was not necessary. Manch Tyson lay huddled on a flat, granite outcrop with a runner of crimson creeping from beneath him. He did not move!

Ring caught Tyson's horse, stripped it and turned it free. It had earned a rest. He dragged the man's body to a notch between the rocks, and entombed it with loose boulders.

THEN, without a rearward look, he headed down the canyon-cut slant toward the valley. His eyes were smoky. Pallor marked the tight line of his long jaws. His cheeks seemed to have pinched in a trifle more. Half of his job was finished. The hardest half lay ahead. The last of his youth had been left behind. He was a man of leather and steel, tried in the crucible of seething blood, as he rode down to face Torch Turnbull, the 'old curly wolf, himself.'

In one thing there was balm. He was leaving the long trails behind him forever from this day. They had been only a means to and end with Ring. He had followed their perilous twists only because he had faith that some day they would bring him to the trail of the man he sought. He hardly expected to find Turnbull anywhere but on the owlhoot.

Ring had ridden with long riders for half a dozen years before he encountered Manch Tyson. That was in a hide-out down in The Nations, where fugitives and bandits found united security from the law. He had thrown in with Tyson, patiently biding his time for some clew. And now circumstances had finally forced Tyson to lead him to the man he wanted.

Ring's thoughts swept back to another red day when life had peaked up to a crisis for him. He had been only ten then. But he could still hear the savage spat of merciless bullets as they riddled the ranch house of the Briscoes. The vicious screech of glancing lead from the face of the living-room chimney in which his mother had placed him, still rasped in his mind.

He remembered the silent, booted feet of his father which lay within his line of vision on the hearth below, as he stood on a stool that lifted him clear of danger in the chimney-throat. His father had been the first to go under in that two hour hell of sleeting lead and bloodthirsty nickel. He had heard Ted, his eldest brother, breathing from punctured lungs as he fought until life slipped from him. Ring would never forget the soggy sound

of a glancing .45 slug as it killed Wyatt, another brother.

Ring never had known when his mother died. She had been loading guns for Lanky, the third of her four sons. Lanky had started to sob. Then Lanky had opened the door and gone out with his guns roaring. He had made it as far as the wagon-shed when he collapsed beneath the weight of the enemy bullets that riddled him. Even then he had not been dead. Like wolves, they had come circling in, slowly, carefully. Then the finishing shot. A triumphant, boastful growl in a voice Ring had never forgotten. Manch Tyson had fired that last shot into Lanky.

And so had come to an end Ben Briscoe's Rocking B. It had met the fate of so many other cattle spreads of its kind, just big enough to be a thorn in the sides of land-greedy, grass-hungry syndicate outfits, and too small to buck their power.

Paid killers had performed the task for the syndicates. They had carried out the chore efficiently, with a minimum of loss to themselves.

None of them had looked up the chimney. That was where their leader, red-bearded, flaming-haired, cold-eyed Torch Turnbull, had erred. One of the Briscoes *had* survived. A boy of ten. That was all. Torch Turnbull probably would have laughed had he known about it.

He would not laugh now. The last of the Briscoes was on his trail.

LIFE had been no picnic for Ring. He had escaped from the burning ranch house while Turnbull and his gunmen were riding away. He spent two years of drudgery on a Panhandle hay ranch—then the usual apprenticeship as horse wrangler for an outfit on the Brazos—a riding job in the course of time. Finally, at eighteen, he began his search for Torch Turnbull. It led him over most of the west. Posses haunted his trail more than once. His description was known to many sheriffs.

Ring's reverie was broken by faint, distant sounds as of the popping of dry cedar twigs—one report, with a crackle of others over-lapping it. The wind had changed before it was finished, muffling it with tantalizing perversity.

He rose in the stirrups. Those had been rifles talking. He eared the breeze, but he heard nothing more. Finally, he settled back, his brow crinkling. He couldn't tell where the shots had been fired: perhaps from the valley ahead, perhaps back in the slants. At any rate, they had been far away.

He rode on. Cattle broke frequently from the chokeberry thickets. Their brand was the Box 5.

In topping the rim of a cross canyon, he sighted the ranch spread. It was nearer now, perhaps only five miles away. He could make out the squatty log house and the heavy green background of the creek brush enclosing the layout almost in a three-quarter loop. But to the northwest, the grass flats reached it.

Nothing moved about it, no sign of life. Even the corral was empty. In the clear air Ring could see the dropped bars of the gate. It looked deserted, but he rode on, down into the canyon, which promised to fan out into the valley floor a mile or so beyond.

A few minutes later he abruptly halted the horse again and cupped his hat to catch sounds. He thought he had heard once more that quick snap of a rifle, with the answering volley chattering a staccato reply. But the high flanks around him muted the sound, and he could not be positive.

CHAPTER TWO

Ranch of Death

RING rode the wagon trail for the last half mile of his approach, passing beneath an arch of cedar poles from which hung a ripsawed pine board on which was branded:

Box 5
Peter Cathcart, Prop.

That was Torch Turnbull's real name then. But no matter. Ring would know Turnbull no matter how heavily time had dealt with him.

The Box 5 ranch-house remained blankly silent as Ring rode up to its low, solid, north front which was not relieved by even a porch.

It was not until he rounded the corner to the west side which was the hoof-beaten ranch yard with hitch rail and horse trough that the latent uneasiness in him rose up suddenly to send a chill wave of warning through him. His eyes swept quickly about. He shifted in the saddle, preparatory to dismounting. Then froze in that position.

Bullet scars! This west face of the log ranch house was riddled with them—dozens of them—scores of them. Long cedar splinters dangling in the wind from the log wall—chinking ripped out. . . . Fresh scars! Unbleached by the sun.

—The windows had been smashed to jagged spikes. Barricades of tables, planks and chairs filled the lower halves of the windows. The kitchen door was splintered, bullet-beaten, but it still stood.

Now he knew the origin of those distant rifle shots. Now he realized the significance of the thick silence, the deserted outward aspect of the place. It was *not* deserted. The electric intuition flashed upon him that eyes were watching his every move—many eyes.

He could not see them in the windows that gaped at him dismally, but he knew they were there. The heavy brush of the creek bottom, which approached to within two hundred yards to the west, south and east, suddenly seemed to close in menacingly. More eyes were there, and guns. He could *feel* their sinister presence.

His pulse surged into a tom-tom beat, but he mastered it instantly. He knew that a false move now might mean death. Beyond a doubt he had ridden unwittingly into a bullet siege. He felt that he was bracketed between guns that remained silent while eyes over the sights awaited the first move that would proclaim him as friend or foe to either side.

The ranch house was nearest, the front door only thirty feet away. The shelter of the brush was far—too far.

Ring suddenly swung low to the off-side of the horse. At the same time he flashed a rowell across its flank.

"Open the front door," he barked. "I'm comin' in!" The horse leaped out of its tracks with a startled bound.

Whizzing death stormed down on him. Yellow-tongued serpents seemed to come alive in the brush and lick out venomously at him. He had made his choice. He was an enemy to those in the creek bottom. They had opened fire on him.

But the horse was covering ground. Bullet furrows rose in long streamers in the dust at its feet. Metal snapped in the air like closing fangs about him. He could hear slugs hitting the log walls as the animal rounded the corner.

"Open, for God's sake," he cried between set teeth. His hat twitched on his head. He felt the brand of a skin-burning bullet on his thigh.

The horse was within a jump of the door, and Ring could feel it setting itself for a sliding stop to avoid crashing into the barrier. A bullet creased the fork

within an inch of Ring's nose. If the door did not open. . . .

But it did open and the horse leaped through it. The opening, too narrow for both their bodies, swept Ring from his awkward position. He landed, stunned by the impact with the door frame. A hand siezed him, dragged him inside.

Then the door slammed, and a bar dropped. Vengeful lead beat at it for an instant. Then the full storm of metal resumed from three sides of the shack, pouring through the upper, unprotected halves of the windows like red-hot bees.

Ring thought of his horse and tried to rise. But a hand pressed him down.

"Easy, fella," a voice said with strange calmness. "They'll empty out in a minute. Keep your head down or you'll stop one. Your cayuse ain't been hit yet."

RING looked up into a big, rugged, powerfully-featured face. Time had furrowed it. There was a square beard that had once been fiery red—with a tinge of frost caught in it now—hair of the same hue. Only the eyes had not changed. They were still level, shot by reckless fire.

Some sudden shift in Ring's expression must have given the old gunman a vague, disturbing premonition. Turnbull's heavy, wide shoulders seemed to bunch a trifle. He had a .45 in his hand. Now it suddenly jammed into Ring's side.

"Who are you, stranger?" the bearded giant growled softly. "Speak rapid . . . and straight."

"I'm the hombre those boys in the tules were trying to ventilate," Ring countered, coolly. Deliberately he pushed the menacing gun away. "I'm ticklish."

All Ring sought was an even break, a chance to move to at least arm's length. Then he would tell Torch Turnbull who he was. Ring's life had centered on this very moment for fifteen years. He did not aim to let his chance slip now, no matter what the circumstances or odds.

He rose to his height, which still was two inches short of the old gunman's towering stature. Torch Turnbull read the purpose in his eyes, and the old killer dropped back a pace, his powerful body coiling.

Then the nearby explosion of a rifle pierced the deadly tension. Ring realized with a start that they were not alone in this bullet-riddled house.

"Got one," a grim voice said calmly.

The man who had spoken was of about Ring's age, with red hair, a big frame and a nose exactly like Torch Turnbull's. He had been sitting at an open chink in the east wall. Now he was dragging himself hastily away as a dozen answering bullets beat on that point. He dragged a bandaged, bullet-broken leg.

A barricade of chairs and tables, reinforced by carpets, mattresses and bearskins to stop bullets, stood in front of the fireplace. Ring could see a slim, young chap lying on a bearskin in its shelter. He breathed with a bubbling sound, and the scarlet hue of high fever burned on his peaked, sunken face. He was young, scarcely out of his teens.

Ring's eyes shifted to the door leading into the kitchen. Someone was crawling in on hands and knees because bullets were still hissing savagely overhead.

"Dad!" a clear voice whispered. "The water barrel's empty. Bullets broke it."

Ring dazedly saw thick black curls above wide hazel eyes, which were underscored by dark circles of exhaustion and strain. But there was the same resolution in them that seemed to pervade the place like a living flame.

A girl! A young woman, perhaps. Ring could not be sure of her age. She wore jeans, a wide belt into which a heavy

six-shooter was thrust, and a woollen shirt. A dark, wide ribbon held her hair. Little boots clad her feet.

Ring saw a raw bullet burn on her round forearm. It had not been bandaged.

SOMEONE else was in the kitchen. A grim-eyed, stocky, dark-haired fellow of about thirty. He resembled the girl somewhat. He glanced into the living room, eyeing Ring with somber, cool speculation for an instant. Then his face vanished as he returned to his eternal vigil at some loophole back there.

The girl crawled to her father's side. She was sizing up Ring with that same impersonal appraisal. They seemed unnaturally calm, all of them. His violent arrival among them had scarcely caused a ripple. Suddenly Ring realized. These people were beyond the stage of surprise. The expectation of death was in their eyes. They had been through too much to be easily moved by anything additional.

"Who is he, dad?" she asked.

"That's what I'm tryin' to find out," the bulky head of this besieged group tersely replied. "Again I ask you who you are, fella? Any answer?"

"Tyson told me you live here," Ring answered. He had shelved his own plans, for the moment, at least. The appearance of the girl had thrown the situation into a new snarl. Torch Turnbull's face did not shift. Yet Ring sensed that Tyson's name had given the rough, old gunman a shock. "Manch Tyson," Ring repeated slowly, reading beneath the surface, the effect it was having on Turnbull.

"Never heard of him," the big man growled, after a momentary hesitation. "I don't care who sent you. Who are you? I won't ask again."

"Tyson called me Buck Sims. That's as good a name as any, right now. I am looking for a jigger named Tor. . . ."

"*My* name is Cathcart," the big man broke in. "Pete Cathcart. These are my boys, an' my daughter, Constance." There was vivid warning in his gaze. And a plea, too, a plea for silence. Pete Cathcart, alias Torch Turnbull, did not want his past revealed.

"I drifted up from the south, tumbleweedin' maybe," Ring explained. "Lookin' for a job to do. I waltzed into this party with my head up, but blind as a bat. Didn't jerry to what was going on until I saw that this house had just been chewed plenty by slugs. I savvied that I was caught in the middle. The door was my nearest cover. So I took it."

"Well, you're here to stay now, I reckon," Turnbull predicted grimly, his hand relaxing on his gun. "You can help us, or watch us. Draw your cards. You'll never get out of her alive either way, from the lay of things."

Ring smiled thinly and jerked his head significantly toward a window. "You're askin' me to set in at a game with strangers," he remarked. "That's always a poor gamble. Who are they?"

"You don't know 'em?" Turnbull quizzed suspiciously.

"You saw them introduce theirselves," Ring snapped testily. "If they were amigos of mine, they sure drew a fine bead. They durned near shot my pants off me."

"That's right," the other conceded. "They didn't want you to get in alive. Better blindfold your horse an' tie him. Drag that sideboard up against the front wall to shield him. We got enough grief without havin' a horse stompin' on us."

Ring did as was told. The sideboard was a heavy, home-built affair that would give the animal protection. Except for a furrow on its haunch from a glancing

sliver, the horse had escaped injury in the recent fusilade.

"Got any shells?" the father asked tersely. "We're gettin' down to bedrock."

THE firing had ceased entirely—one of those tense, waiting lulls, such as the one during which Ring rode unsuspectingly into this death trap. The Turnbulls—the Cathcarts, rather—were treasuring ammunition. The enemy was carrying on a siege, content to let time win the fight for them.

"I got fifty for my sixes an' the same for the .30-30," Ring told him. "But I'm not sure which side to bet it on. Is that the law out there?"

The girl laughed shrilly. It was the first break in the stolid front the Cathcarts had exhibited. Her laugh was mirthless, mechanical, appallingly bitter. "The law," she derided. "Yes. They're the law . . . because they make their own law on this range. They're killers, murderers, cowardly, beastly assassins. Paid killers. They're doing it for money. Murdering us. Look at Babe—my brother. He's dying and I can't even give him a drink of water. Killers, murderers, the lowest creatures on earth. . . ."

Her voice was rising. Her nerves were on the verge of giving way. But she realized it and caught control of herself. With a dry sob she turned and went to the side of the dying, youngest Cathcart.

Her father stepped close to Ring. "They don't know about anybody named Torch Turnbull," he breathed. "That's a name you don't even think about here, Sims. I'll kill you if you do. There ain't been anybody by that name in fifteen years. Savvy."

A rifle spoke sharply from the brush. The bullet entered the living room. Ring heard its sinister twang nearby. Mingling with it was the soft slap of impact. The girl lifted to her knees. Ring saw her eyes glaze with a new, overwhelming horror as they fixed on something behind him.

"Denny!" she gasped chokingly. "Denny!"

Ring whirled. The red-headed young Cathcart, he who had been dragging the wounded leg, had fallen, huddled partly on his side. His lips were parted in a deathly grimace. There was a ghastly, crimson-rimmed circle in his temple.

CHAPTER THREE

Woman Killers!

DEATH! It had struck in a flash, and inexorably. The second of the Cathcarts was out of the fight forever.

"Denny!" The girl started across the living room toward her dead brother. She was swaying slightly, her slim-waisted form moving like a mechanical doll. The expression on her ashen face was one that Ring never forgot.

He halted her as she groped to pass him. "No, no," he commanded gently. "It's death. Some sharpshooter has a line on that spot. He must be in a tree. The bullet came downward through that window. It's death to touch him."

She tried to push away. But her strength left her entirely as he maintained his grasp on her wrists. She began to sway. Ring lifted her in his arms. She was small, and light. Her throat was smooth and white as her head drooped back. Ring placed her on the robe back of the barricade. Her dying brother stirred and babbled deliriously, demanding water. But there was no water either for him or the girl.

However her eyes already were opening. She looked up at him, and the mem-

ory of horror was still vivid in her eyes. But quickly she rallied and her chin stiffened. She sat up. "I'm . . . I'm all right," she breathed. "Help Dad. He needs help now. I'll care for Babe."

Ring turned away with a searing pang of guilt knifing him. She seemed to *trust* him. The irony of it seared deep into his heart. Help Torch Turnbull? Help the man who had led the slayers of his parents and brothers? She did not know what she was asking.

He saw the father kneeling beside the body of Denny Cathcart, as though inviting death. But he was delivering death instead. He was sighting a rifle, he poised like a marble statue, only his eyes alive. Then his finger tripped the trigger. The thud of the report reverberated in the house.

Ring heard a faint, appalled cry. Then the crunch of a breaking tree limb as a body struck it, a flutter of foliage, and the plop of something hitting the ground.

The father moved, and lowering the rifle, lifted the body of his son, and carried it to the front where few bullets found their way. He covered it with a blanket, then returned to his vigil at an open chink in the west wall. His face was like stone. He had accounted for the killer of his son.

He finally looked at Ring. "Made up your mind yet?" he asked in a monotone.

"You haven't told me who the opposition is."

"I'll tell you. Ever hear of Deacon Finch? And Zig Spadero?

"They're out there with about a dozen men. Maybe less than that now. Eight, nine I reckon. That's still too many for us. They've had us here since yesterday mornin'. They got Babe when he went out to the corral at dawn yesterday. They're aimin' to whittle us down, or starve us out."

PETER CATHCART, to give him his right name, shrugged wearily. "You've heard the story before. Plenty of times, unless you've lived in a cave all your life. It's an old one, but still good. Grass grabbers. A month ago a friend at the county seat passed me the word that my title to this ranch was no good. I paid cash for it fifteen years ago, an' brought my family here from Kansas. There's a big outfit that's soaked up all the rest of Whirlwind Valley north of me. The Rainbow S. A stuffed shirt named Snead owns it. Rainbow Snead they call him, because nobody ever found any pot of gold workin' for him. He got his start by dealin' from the bottom of the deck. He's still doin' it. Snead found out that my title was damp, an' was layin' wires to grab my land."

Ring's lips hardened. This sounded like a page from the past. Again the irony of it struck him. In such a way had gone the Rocking B of the Briscoe family in Texas. So was going the Box 5 of Peter Cathcart, alias Torch Turnbull. The bearded ex-gunman probably had paid for this ranch with blood money. Now he was about to lose it by the same route.

Cathcart was continuing. "I still had a chance to win. Legally my range is public domain. Me an' my boys, even Connie, planked homesteads on the water frontage. Snead got wind of that pronto. Yesterday morning we got his answer. He hired some guns to wipe us out. Deacon Finch an' his side-kick, slippery Zig Spadero, are roddin' the bunch. I spotted both of 'em when we first started swappin' lead yesterday. I knew 'em when I was . . . some years ago."

The delirious voice of the dying boy rose. He was again pleading for water. Ring saw cold beads pop out on the father's head. But Cathcart did not even glance in that direction. However Ring realized that he was futilely fighting to

close his ears to the tortured voice of his youngest child. The girl suddenly arose and headed into the kitchen. Her face was ashen, and riven by utter desperation.

"Connie!" her father barked.

She did not halt. Ring, startled, saw her seize a wooden pail that lay overturned near a wrecked table. Her intention flashed upon him. He leaped to intercept her. But her father had realized her plan first. He was ahead of Ring. He halted her as she started to lift the bar from the rear door, which was sagging badly on its broken hinges.

"You can't do it, Connie," her father said dully.

"They wouldn't kill a woman," she cried. "Babe is suffering. I'm going to get water from the springhouse. They wouldn't kill a woman would they? They're not that low. Look. They'll know I'm a woman." She jerked the ribbon and pins from her hair. A rich, dark, waving mass tumbled below her shoulders.

But her father shook his head. "They might. You stay here, Connie."

"I can't stand to see him suffer so. He asks me for water, and I have none to give him. He begs for it. I can't stand it any longer, I tell you."

The other brother, Tully Cathcart, taciturn, eyes rimmed with red, stood by, his face working, his knuckles white on his riflestock. Powder stains were on him. A splinter had slit his cheek. Agony was in the glances he shot into the living room where his kid brother was pleading deliriously.

"We've got to do somethin' for Babe, paw," he said hoarsely. "*Got* to. I'll make a try for it. You can cover me with all the guns. I've got to make a try."

Ring spoke up suddenly. "My legs are longer. I can run faster. I'll take a shot at it."

Tully Cathcart whirled on him. "Us Cathcarts do our own chores," he blazed. "Babe is my brother. It's all I can do for him now. I go, or nobody goes."

Peter Cathcart's pallor showed through his beard. Suddenly he turned fiercely on Tully. "Put on some of Connie's clothes, Tully," he said harshly. "They *might* not notch on you if they think yo're a woman. I'm too big to try it. They'd savvy the minute they saw me." Ring stepped back. That plan might work. But Tully Cathcart objected. Damned if he wanted to hide behind petticoats. Skirts would trip him an'. . . But Peter Cathcart was still the power in this household. He had his way. "Dig out one of your gingham dresses, Connie," he ordered. "An a hat. the one with the bouquet on it. Take off your boots Tully. Your feet won't look so big then."

THE girl, saying no more, went for the garments. The men moved into the living room, the father resuming a lookout. But the gunmen in the willows were not making any rushes. This was a siege, already more than a day along. They had plenty of time to finish this job.

Ring heard the rear door creak. "Hell's fire," he blurted aghast. He saw a slim figure, with dark hair flying, race out into the late afternoon sunlight.

"Connie!" her father cried, appalled.

Connie Cathcart was not letting her brother shoulder the risk. She carried the pail, and she sped for the flimsy springhouse, her hair streaming out. The three men in the house crouched down, their bodies tensing. They darted dismayed glances at each other. Then, with single accord, they hurled themselves to chinks in the walls, Ring pausing only long enough to get his .30-30.

The enemy cordon had been taken by surprise. The girl covered half of the fifty-yard distance before they came alive.

A harsh voice arose. "Hold it. I'll stop her."

"Deacon Finch himself," the father said tensely. A rifle began to crack methodically from the brush. Ring tried to locate it, but could not even see the flash. Then Ring suddenly growled in fury.

"The skunk. He's drawn a dead-line."

They could see the springhouse plainly. Bullets were ripping into its door at intervals of about a second. It evidently was Deacon Finch himself who was back of the trigger. He had drawn a dead-line, right enough. It was death to enter that door.

The girl's pace slowed when she was half a dozen strides from it. The shots rang out with measured beat. Suddenly, like a frightened deer, she leaped ahead again. Ring half-arose, his fingers cramping on his rifle, a groan of dread welling in his throat. He expected to see her cut down.

But no shot sounded. Instead, through the throbbing silence, sounded the rasp of a futile bolt. The girl sped safely into the springhouse, from which Ring caught the glint of clear, cold water before the door closed.

"She out-guessed him," Ring exclaimed. "She was thinking faster than any of us. She counted his shots. He had emptied out. She went through before he could pick up another gun."

"But she's got to come back," her father groaned. "Finch will shoot at *her* this time."

"We can try to help her," Ring panted, leaping to a slit and bellying down as he swung his sights. "Pour it to 'em. Make those thickets jump. It's her only chance. Open up."

He began pumping screaming bullets. He held his bead low, shifting his aim a yard each time, raking the thickets. The guns of the two Cathcarts chimed in. The walls of the battered ranch house spurted flame and metal from three points. The brush aroused like a broken nest of hornets. The battle swelled to a crescendo instantly. Slugs beat on the wall around Ring. Moss and baked mud erupted and stung his eyes as some of the bullets found the chinks. He cast a glance through the kitchen door. He caught a glimpse of waving dark hair and flying feet.

Connie Cathcart had started her return dash, a sloshing pail of water handicapping her. Ring cursed. A bullet slashed earth almost at her feet. Finch, unmoved by the covering fire, was shooting at her, shooting to kill.

She kept coming. Ring continued mechanically to rake the thickets, jamming in fresh shells with feverish fingers, but his eyes were on Connie. He saw her flinch and duck instinctively. Death had snapped near her again.

She was halfway. Then she went down, stumbling forward to her knees. She seemed tiredly to set the pail down. Then she fell flat on her face.

CHAPTER FOUR

A Man's Red Past

RING leaped up, the world suddenly swimming blood-red before him. He went through the door like a madman and down the path toward Connie's slender form. The lowest creatures on earth she had called the beseigers. Her indictment had been all too mild.

He was almost at her side before the first bullets began to spray around him. He did not even heed them. With a sweep of his arms he picked her up. Her right hand was still clenched around the handle of the pail. It was almost full.

Ring shielded her with his body as he bent low and headed back for the house. Water sloshed into his boots with each

winged stride. Bullets snapped savagely about him. He stumbled momentarily once, numbness striking his left foot, and he thought he had been hit. But only the bootheel had been struck. He kept going.

He was in the shadow of the doorway when a .30-30 caught him through the left shoulder. It sent him pitching into the kitchen on his knees. Tully Cathcart slammed the door behind him and dropped the bar as more slugs stormed madly at it.

Ring, his left arm and side going numb, tried to ease his burden to the floor. But Connie Cathcart was not dead, nor even unconscious. With a low cry she pulled herself free and stood up.

"I wasn't hurt," she cried. "I only pretended to be hit. The beast who was shooting at me was getting the range. I planned to wait a moment and start another dash. When you picked me up I had to remain quiet, to save time. Why did you come out for. . . Oh! He's hurt. He's shot!"

Ring looked at her dizzily, not comprehending, for the shock of his wound was sweeping over him. He rose to his feet, but reeled drunkenly. She leaped to him and steadied him.

"I'll . . . be . . . all right," he mumbled. "Through the collar bone, I think. It'll wear off in a minute."

Her brother helped her steady him into the living room. She raced back to the kitchen and brought the pail. It still was about a third full. Ring summoned a tight grin.

"You Cathcarts are stubborn," he said thickly. She stopped before him, but he shook his head and scowled. "The kid needs it," he said. "Give it to him."

She carried the water behind the barricade. After a moment she returned slowly. The flush of action had been suddenly swept from her face.

"Babe doesn't need it now," she said dully.

Deep down in her voice was mighty, soul-rending grief. She stood there still, her eyes wide, staring into space. She was fighting for control. And she succeeded.

"I'll dress your shoulder," she said after a moment. "Steady now, while I cut away the shirt."

"Look out for that watch in the breast pocket," Ring warned as she bent over him with scissors.

SHE removed the watch. But the back had opened. She paused a moment to look at a yellow, faded little photograph inside the case. The watch was a silver one that Ring had taken from his father's body.

"Your mother, isn't it," she nodded. "I can tell."

Ring confirmed it, his lips tight.

"What was her name?" she asked as she worked with steady, rapid hands.

"Nellie," Ring answered huskily.

"Nellie Sims," she mused.

Ring looked at her. "No," he said harshly. "Nellie *Briscoe!*"

Involuntarily he spoke the name sharply, challengingly. It rang through the room. Peter Cathcart wheeled. He was glaring at Ring, his bleak eyes widening, a stunned light in them. He stared, and his face seemed to go more haggard. He said nothing. Merely stared. Then he turned away again to peer out into the oncoming twilight that was settling over the creek bottom. His shoulders had taken on an added weight.

The red past of Torch Turnbull had suddenly arisen to damn Peter Cathcart at the moment of his greatest misery. His eyes turned reluctantly to the blanket-shrouded form in the corner, then to the barricade at the fireplace which no longer echoed to the labored breathing of his youngest son. Peter Cathcart's eyes were like dead embers. He was paying—and he had still more to give. . . .

Connie Cathcart had been too busy with her task to note this by-play. When she finished, Ring reached for his rifle and arose. He swayed a trifle at first. But the numbness had gone now. The throbbing pain had started, and was galloping through his body. But he could use his left arm without much effort.

"You better remain quiet," she urged.

"There'll likely be plenty of time to be quiet after a while," Ring rejected grimly as he settled down at a chink and peered out. Twilight was deepening rapidly. The last glow of sunset brocaded the rims of the Saddlebacks. The tang of smoke was in the air. Coffee and grub was being cooked for the besieging killers somewhere back in the brush.

"I see you've made up your mind," Peter Cathcart remarked somberly.

"It's always an open season on woman-killers with me," Ring countered coldly.

Cathcart lapsed into brooding silence. The girl brought them a drink of water and the last remnants of food in the place. She knelt beside Ring to peer out. Her cheek was almost against his. Her presence stirred a new emotion in him.

RING turned and spoke to her father. "We'll have half an hour of darkness before the moon gets up. We've got to get out of here. It's our last chance."

"Denny tried it last night," the father explained reluctantly. "He hadn't crawled ten feet from the door before they cut down on him. He got back with a broken leg. We have no horses to drift on, even if we should break through. They ran off the cavvy when they first clamped down on us."

"There's my horse," Ring argued. "One of us might get through and bring some help. Got any friends that would swing a trigger for you?"

"Not in less than a couple day's ride," the old man said bitterly. "I told you that the Rainbow S had this range under a blanket. Rainbow Snead has things sewed up. That's why they're takin' their time in this stamp-out."

Ring stared morosely into the gathering darkness. It looked as if he had reached the end of the trail. He and Torch Turnbull were playing it out together. The chances were a hundred to one against even a mounted man breaking through that ring of steel. No doubt, now that evening had come, the circle of gunmen had widened out to enclose even the north quarter of the circle, which had been only indirectly guarded from the flanks during the day because of the lack of cover out there. A horse would be an easy target. A man afoot would have little chance, single-handed on the open flat.

"Why haven't they tried to burn you out?" he asked.

"I reckon that's their plan," the father explained. "But a thunderstorm struck late yesterday an' things was too wet for 'em last night. But the house has dried off today. They'll likely try it tonight. They couldn't get near enough in daylight."

"We've got to beat 'em to the punch," Ring snapped. "I'd rather go down while I'm carryin' the poison to 'em, than wait until they weasel me out for the kill. I'd rest easier if I went that way."

"Me too," Tully Cathcart agreed from the kitchen.

"I've got an idea," Ring went on. "Let's rig a dummy on my horse, and spook it out the front door as bait. They may fall for it long enough to give us our chance. While they're smokin' up the horse an' the dummy, we'll make a rush for the willows. Maybe all three of us won't make it. Some of 'em will spot us, that's sure. But if two, or even one of us gets into the brush among 'em they'll have the hot end of a buzzsaw in their hands."

CHAPTER FIVE

Stamp-Out

THE father gave a growl of approval. Connie Cathcart came to eager life, glad that the crisis had arrived, and went hurrying into the leanto off the east wall of the kitchen.

"Here's a shirt and hat and pants," she said, returning. "Hurry. I'll rip a mattress. We can stuff them with the hair. Oh, hurry, hurry. Before the moon comes up."

She and Ring worked feverishly. Ring tied together a frame, using the back of a chair and a table leg. The girl was stuffing the garments. She found pins, rawhide thongs and string to use. She was in a quiver of nervous anxiety. He could hear her quick breathing. Now and then they brushed together, and Ring knew how fiercely he wanted her to go on living.

Within fifteen minutes they had the dummy mounted in the saddle, moored it with thongs to the rigging. The blindfolded horse was uneasy, but remained peaceful.

"All set," Ring finally warned the two men. Then he turned on the girl. "You've got a six-gun, haven't you? Now you get into that chimney-throat. Climb into it out of sight. A chimney saved my life once. Stay there."

"But I . . . I want to go with. . ." she began angrily.

Ring picked her up bodily, pushed a chair into the fireplace and placed her on it.

"Stay there," he ordered. "If we don't come back, watch your chance and fade out of here. If they catch you . . . well, you've got a gun."

The two Cathcarts were ready. "I'm takin' only my sixes," Ring said. "They're the thing for work in the brush."

He saw Peter Cathcart's big frame silhouetted against a window, long-barreled forty-fives in each heavy fist. Tully Cathcart had only one side-gun, but he had a skinning knife in his left hand for secondary use.

"Swing the front door," Ring whispered. "No noise."

Ring wheeled the horse as the younger Cathcart unbarred and eased the door wide. "Ramble!" Ring hissed, slipping the blindfold from the animal, and bringing his hand down on its flank with a sharp report. The horse leaped for the door, its hoofs thundering on the floor. Ring ran with it, pressing the dummy back to allow it to clear the frame. He released it as the horse hit full stride in the doorway.

With a thud of hoofs the animal was on its way. The three men whirled instantly and glided to the kitchen door. Even as they reached it, with a flurry of yells that ran around the circle, the killers opened up on the horse.

RING threw the rear door open, and was the first through it. Peter Cathcart was half a stride behind him, and Tully, cursing his slowness, was at his father's heels.

Red flashes were erupting on either flank, and to the front of the ranch house. The heavier thud of six-shooters mingled with the crisp, keen, tap of rifles. Two thirds of the encircling gunmen were bracketing the horse. It could not live many seconds in that withering cross-rip of metal.

The three were tearing for the brush, their bodies bent, teeth set. They passed the springhouse before the first excited shot was fired at them. It came from directly ahead. The bullet went over them.

"Spread out," Ring panted. "Save your triggers until you can see your man. No time to reload. Make . . . shots . . . count."

The first gunman was firing excitedly, but using a rifle, and the brush handicapped him as the trio spread apart and veered slightly to his left. But two more, a score of yards to either side joined in, their guns painting bright smears of winking red in the brush.

Ring heard Tully Cathcart give a sick curse, more of bitter disappointment than of pain, as he went down.

The two of them, Ring and Peter Cathcart, reached the willows. A six-shooter bellowed almost in Ring's face. He fired, and the flash was partly muffled by the body of the gunman who had reared up in his path. The fellow was blasted aside, lifeless.

"Stay with me," Ring spat at Cathcart. "We don't want to be shootin' into each other."

There was wild yelling on the other wings of the circle. The horse had gone down, and the ruse had been discovered.

Ring eased his pace. He and Cathcart pushed slowly ahead, parting brush with slim, steel bores that thirsted for sight of a foe. The gunmen were converging on them now. They could hear brush crashing ahead. The voice that Cathcart had identified as that of Deacon Finch, was directing them.

Cathcart's guns suddenly lashed out thunderously. A body went reeling and crashing into a clump of berry brush to their right.

"I got only one thing to say," Cathcart remarked harshly as they moved on to meet the charging opposition. "I didn't know your maw was in that house. I was told that she went to town. I was a fool for believin' it. But that's why I picked that day for the stamp-out. It ain't much in my favor. I've earned everything that's happened to me. But, until yesterday, I never pulled a trigger on a human bein' from the minute I saw her layin' there."

Ring did not answer. The brush was thinning ahead into a fifty-yard flat with marsh grass waving knee-high. Ring stopped his companion. "We'll circle it. They know what they're up against now. They've quit comin' to us. They're waitin' for us to walk into their reapers."

THEY veered, staying in the heavier thickets. It was impossible to move in silence. They advanced by rushes, pausing each time to flatten out, for every move now brought bullets from half a dozen guns. They were prayer shots, however, only a few of them came close.

Ring suddenly pointed to a red glow that had come in view. "Their camp," he breathed. "Look! Horses." Realizing their opportunity, they broke into full speed. Instantly the brush came alive as the gunmen caught their purpose.

The darkness was tipped with darts of hot flame. They could hear the rush to intercept them. Ring's guns began to slash into the thickets, for now he caught glimpses of his foes. He knocked one of them over. Return bullets clawed savagely through the darkness for him, but fell short, sometimes so close the two men could feel the wind.

Peter Cathcart was firing with steely coolness. They reloaded once, but there was no time to repeat. Ring saved three shells in each gun for the final blast.

The odds had dropped. Finch's gunmen had suffered a fierce toll. There probably were not more than half a dozen of them on their feet now. Paid killers, they had fought a cautious, calculating fight, aiming at personal safety above all. Their methods had been wrong. Ring and Cathcart were demonstrating the right way. Contemptuous of death, in fact resigned to it, they were closing on their foes, carrying the fight to them.

They burst onto a sand bar fringing the creek. The cookfire, coals glowing red,

lighted the horses tethered among the trees beyond. Three men burst simultaneously from cover a hundred feet away. One was a barrel-legged, squatty toad-like man with a wide mouth, and expensively garbed. He paused now in sudden frozen fear.

Peter Cathcart leaped a stride in advance of Ring, his guns hip high, his face twisting into wild exultation. "By God, I didn't think I'd have the luck," he boomed. "Take it, Snead. You'll never see your cows eat my grass." His brace of guns thundered as he spoke. The squatty man was snatched from his feet by the twin impact of smashing slugs, and hurled lifeless on his back.

"Rainbow" Snead, the grasshog of Whirlwind Valley had made the mistake of coming to watch the finale of his bought-and-paid-for stamp-out. He had been caught in the eruption.

Ring, with a curse of impatience, leaped to Cathcart's side. Then he heard the rip of a bullet as it pierced the big man's body.

SNEAD'S two companions were in flaming action. Ring had never seen them before, but the black coat and white collar of one identified him as Deacon Finch.

Ring's guns drew a double streak of flame on Finch. The ramrod of the killers was thrown back against a tree. From there he pitched forward on his face across the still-quivering legs of Snead. He was dead.

Peter Cathcart was not down yet. He was swaying, his face tinged with the onrushing death that he was warding off while he finished this job. His guns were thundering at the third man. This one was smart, oily and Spanish. He was ripping bullets frenziedly at Cathcart. Ring could hear them smashing into the big man. Zig Spadero was the swart man's name, and he had been Deacon Finch's running mate in deviltry.

Abruptly Spadero's knees gave way, and he sprawled out on his face. He had four bullets in him, but he did not die quickly nor easily.

Ring heard Cathcart crash to the ground at his side. But two more gunmen had come racing into view. They halted, dismayed as they saw their three leaders down. Desperately they tried to down Ring. Ring shot one of them squarely through the belt buckle. The other turned to run, but a leg was jerked from under him by another roaring slug from Ring's gun.

Nearby the brush crashed, but the sound began to recede. One of the killers was still alive, but he was going away from this carnival of death as fast as he could crawl.

Ring whirled as a rustle sounded behind him. But this was no enemy. Connie Cathcart rushed into view. She ran sobbing to her father's side.

"Tully . . ." Peter Cathcart gasped. "How. . . ?"

"He'll get well, dad," she said chokingly.

Peter Cathcart looked up at Ring, and a tired, but triumphant smile formed on his lips. In the glow of the fire his beard and hair seemed to flame again with the ruddy hue of his lost youth.

"One left that'll keep the name going," he murmured. "One Cathcart left."

Then he was dead. And with him went his past. For Ring knew that he would never tell. Time and destiny had balanced accounts.

After a time Ring lifted the girl. She had ceased sobbing now. She was soul-weary. She settled back in his arms as he headed back for the ranch house where Tully lay wounded. Her eyes opened. She clung closer to him.

THE END

YOU'LL FIND A NEW, PALPITANT THRILL TREAT IN
THIS FASCINATING NEW MAGAZINE

TERROR TALES

On All Newsstands Now!

The sort of thrill shockers that quicken the heart-beats and add a new glow to the most world-weary eyes. Daring, robust tales of secret midnight rites and stark terror beneath some pale new moon. Eerie yarns of impenetrable mystery and breath-taking evil. Grim stories of witchery, werewolfery and mystic blood cults, written against a weird background of medieval folklore which will thrill and chill you!

DON'T MISS THIS FIRST CHILL-PACKED ISSUE!

House of Living Death

Complete Mystery-Terror Novel
BY ARTHUR LEO ZAGAT

Three Spine-Tingling Novelettes

Terror Island
BY HUGH B. CAVE

Dead Man's Bride
BY WYATT BLASSINGAME

Hands Beyond the Grave
BY HENRY TREAT SPERRY

Plus Short Terror Tales by Other Masters of Eerie Fiction!

. . . All in This First Great All-Star Issue . . .

Get Your Copy Today!

IN THE SADDLE

THIS is a sort of celebration issue, folks! With *Dime Western* becoming a twice-a-month magazine with this issue, we're proud and pleased and appreciative all at the same time. And we feel like going back to the pledge we made our readers long ago in the very first issue of *Dime Western Magazine*. This is what we said then, with that queer mixture of hope and apprehension which goes into the launching of any new magazine. . . .

"It is the hope of *Dime Western* to bring you each month a large cross section of the most glamorous adventureland the world has ever known. . . . Human, man-stuff yarns that will put a new tingle into your blood and pull your heart strings. Stark, real-life drama ripped raw from the lives of that sturdy Western breed who lived out their lives on horseback. You'll know the tang of hot saddle leather under the blazing sun of the Texas cattle trails—feel the zero pinch of sweeping Montana blizzards—listen to the blatant blare of honky-tonk main streets in a score of Colorado mining towns!

"And, last but not least, you'll share adventure and hardship, trail-side battle thrill and heady romance with the finest type of two-fisted, hard-riding adventurer this country has ever produced—our Western cowboy!

"The editors of *Dime Western* realize that they've tackled a he-man job in attempting to crowd all this into any one magazine. But we're willing and game to die trying.

"Come hell or high-water we'll never sell our saddle!"

That's what we said, in part, in that first, far-distant issue of this magazine. We may have sounded hopeful, confident. But the fact of the matter was that we were more than a little scared. We knew we were tackling a tough job and we had no way of knowing in advance just how that new, ambitious endeavor was going to turn out.

Well, as it happened, our fears were groundless; our worries useless! Dealing with those top-hand authors who so soon signed up under the new *Dime Western* banner proved to be more fun than work. They, not the editors, put the magazine over, enlisted the favor of the magazine-reading public, made steady readers of most of the western story fans in the country!

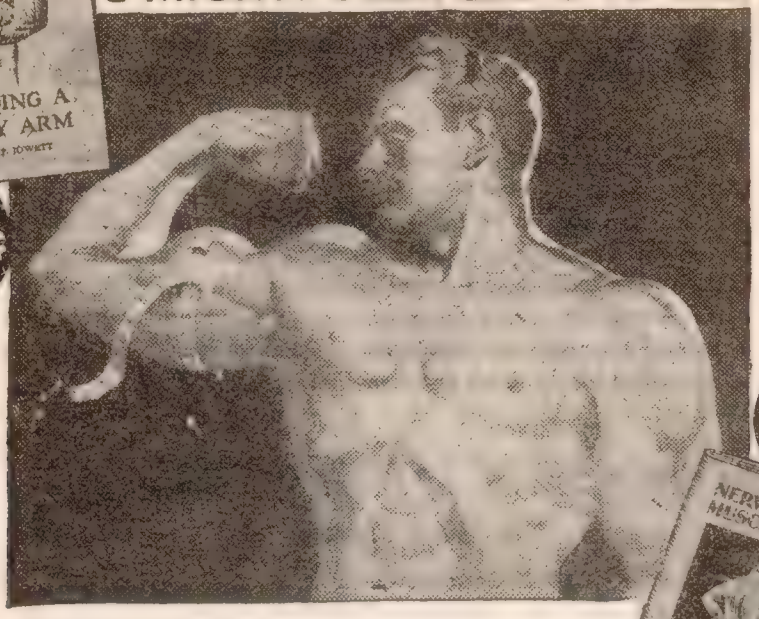
The editors of *Dime Western,* as we say, are feeling mighty happy and proud and appreciative today. We wonder if we'd be out of order if we were to extend our heartfelt thanks to our authors, to whose fine cooperation and hard, unselfish work we owe so much—and to our readers, God bless them, whose loyal support has made *Dime Western* a success!

And so, *Dime Western* becomes a twice-a-month magazine—thanks to you all!

Naturally, we've planned big things for the first end-of-the-month issue. And as usual our authors have delivered the goods. There'll be a great man-stuff novel by T. T. Flynn and novelettes by Walt Coburn, Olmsted, Nafziger and Mahaffay—plus shorts and other features!

THIS BOOK shows how to build a MIGHTY ARM and a 16 inch BICEP!

25¢



FREE

Send for . . .
"MOULDING A MIGHTY ARM"
A Complete Course for Only 25c

WHY NOT GET AN ARM OF MIGHT with the power and grip to obey your physical desires? Weaklings whose arms were scrawny pieces of skin and bone have taken this course and in a very short time developed themselves into men of powerful proportions with bulging biceps and brawny forearms. He-men with strong, solid arms of power that are respected by men and admired by women! Wouldn't you like to get a magnificent bicep like the one shown in the idealized figure above?

THIS COURSE IS SPECIALLY PLANNED TO BUILD EVERY MUSCLE IN YOUR ARM!

It has been scientifically worked out for that purpose. Many pupils have developed a pair of triceps shaped like a horseshoe, and just as strong, and a pair of biceps that show their double head formation. The sinewy cables between the biceps and elbow are deep and thick with wire cable-like ligaments. The forearm bellies with bulk, the great supenator lifting muscles become a column of power, and their wrists are alive and writhe with cordy sinew. Why not start now to build a he-man's arm? Send 25c for this course today.

You can't make a mistake. The assurance of the strongest armed man in the world stands behind this course. You get his secret methods of strength development illustrated and explained as you like them. Mail your order now while you can still get this course for only 25c.

You are not limited to the arm. Try any one of the courses listed in the coupon at 25c. Or, try all six of them for only $1.00.

MAIL YOUR ORDER NOW
and you will receive a Free Copy of "NERVES OF STEEL, MUSCLES LIKE IRON."

It describes George F. Jowett's rise from a puny boy to be one of the world's strongest athletes with a chest measurement of 49 inches and an 18-inch bicep! It explains why he is called "Champion of Champions" . . . and there is a "thrill" in every page.

A priceless book to the strength fan and muscle builder. Full of pictures of marvelous bodied men who tell you decisively how to build symmetry and strength the Jowett Way! Reach Out . . . Grasp This Special Offer.

FREE BOOK WITH PHOTOS OF FAMOUS STRONG MEN

George F. Jowett "Champion of Champions" Winner of many contests for strength and physical perfection!

JOWETT INSTITUTE OF PHYSICAL CULTURE
Dept. 109Jo, 422 Poplar St.
Scranton, Pa.

George F. Jowett: Your proposition looks good to me. Send, by return mail, prepaid, the courses checked below for which I am enclosing_____

- ☐ Moulding a Mighty Arm, 25c
- ☐ Moulding a Mighty Back, 25c
- ☐ Moulding a Mighty Grip, 25c
- ☐ Moulding a Mighty Chest, 25c
- ☐ Moulding Mighty Legs, 25c
- ☐ Strong Man Stunts Made Easy 25c
- ☐ All 6 Books for $1.00.

Name_____Age___

Address_____

The New, *Different* Western Magazine—

LONGRIDERS OF THE WEST

MAVERICKS

Dedicated and devoted to those grimly colorful, oft-times tragic figures who rode the secret, twisting trails of wanted men—from the stark Missouri River Badlands to the sandy, sun-baked reaches of the Mexican Border country. Mavericks all, wanderers beyond the law, lacking home or brand or permanent friend, yet those men stood true to their individual courage code by which men judge other men the world over. Wanderers along those winding, little-known trails where the owl hoots often and the price of negligence is often a long rope and a short prayer, or an unmarked lonely grave in the malpai . . . .

MESQUITE MANHUNTERS

by Kent Thorn

A gripping, full-length 40,000 word novel of those five reckless and lovable longriders, Lance Clayton, Doc Grimson, Charlie Parr, Flint Maddox and the lethargic Lockjaw Johnson, who was "slow thinkin' but almighty fast with his guns." Men to ride the river with—men who are bound together by the high flame of their courage and loyalty—the unforgettable Bunch who have been called "The Five Musketeers of the Range."

—Also—

3 Memorable Action Novelettes by 3 Famous Western Writers

The Wild Bunch Rides On

by Walt Coburn

Another thrilling fictionized adventure of the Wild Bunch and its immortal leader —Butch Cassidy!

Sleeper Pays a Debt

by Max Brand

Sleeper, most quixotic of outlaws, squares accounts with a bounty-hunting posse.

Guns of the Owlhoot Pack

by Ray Nafziger

Billy the Kid rides again along the mesquite shadows.

All in the great October Issue—Watch for it at your newsstand!
On Sale August 24th!

A NEW LIFETIME BUSINESS

OPENED TO EARNEST MEN

NO HIGH PRESSURE SELLING
NO HOUSE-TO-HOUSE CANVASSING

INCOME EQUAL TO REQUIREMENTS OF THE HIGH-GRADE BUSINESS MAN

G. F. Pegram, Texas, clears $315 in his first 5 days in this business. J. C. May, Connecticut, cleared $262.35 in 9 days. E. Foyer, Calif., makes $4,920 in 3 months' time. C. W. Ferrell, Ohio, writes: "My earnings have run well above $1,000 in a month's time"—he has made over 1,000 sales, paying him as high as $5 to $60 profit each sale. J. Clarke Baker, Connecticut, sells 13 firms in 3 days' time, netting $151.71 clear profit—over $50 a day profit. Writes that 9 of these 13 firms are already using second or third repeat refill orders. And so on. These men had never sold this item before they came with us! How could they enter a field totally new to them and earn such remarkable sums in these desperate times? Read the answer in this announcement. Read about a new business that does away with the need for high pressure selling. A rich field that is creating new money-making frontiers for wide-awake men. Those who enter now will pioneer—to them will go the choicest opportunities.

FOUR $15 SALES DAILY PAY $280 WEEKLY

INSTALLING NEW BUSINESS SPECIALTY ON FREE TRIAL—MAKING EXCEPTIONAL CASH SAVINGS FOR CONCERNS THROUGHOUT THE U. S. AND CANADA

$4,707 RETURNS
For One Kansas Store in Three Months

Sanders Ridgway of Kansas invests $85.60 and shows returns of $4,707.00 between April 5th and June 29th! Bowser Lumber and Feed Co., West Virginia, invests $15, report returns well over $1,000.00! Fox Ice and Coal Co., Wisconsin, returns $3,564.00! Baltimore Sporting Goods Store invests $45, returns $1,600.00! Pollom & Son, Indiana, in 45 days turned $15 installation into $2,250.00 cash.

With these and scores of similar results to display, our representatives interest business men from the very smallest to the very largest. No one can dispute the proof in the photo-copies of actual letters which our men show.

NO HIGH PRESSURE—SIMPLY INSTALL—LET IT SELL ITSELF

Here is a business offering an invention so successful that we make it sell itself. Our representatives simply tell what they offer, show proof of success in every line of business and every section of the country. Then install the specialty without a dollar down. It starts working at once, producing a cash return that can be counted like the other cash register money. The customer sees with his own eyes a big, immediate profit on his proposed investment. Usually he has the investment, and his profit besides, before the representative returns. The representative calls back, collects his money. OUT OF EVERY $75 BUSINESS THE REPRESENTATIVE DOES, NEARLY $60 IS HIS OWN PROFIT! THE SMALLEST HE MAKES IS $5 ON A $7.50 SALE! Our men are making sales running into the hundreds. They are getting the attention of the largest concerns in the country, and selling to the smaller businesses by the thousands. You can get exclusive rights. Business is GOOD, in this line, in small towns or big cities alike! It's on the boom now. Get in while the business is young!

F. E. ARMSTRONG, Pres., Dept. 4066-J, MOBILE, ALABAMA

COMPLETE TRAINING FURNISHED

Many men with us today started at scratch, many coming out of clerking jobs, many out of small businesses, some out of large concerns. We teach you every angle of the business. We hand you the biggest money-making business of its kind in the country. You try out this business ABSOLUTELY WITHOUT RISKING A RED COPPER CENT OF YOUR OWN. Can't possibly tell you all in the limited space available here. Mail the coupon now for full information—nothing to risk, everything to gain.

Brilliant Record of Success

As well as selling thousands of installations to small merchants, professional men, etc., we number either the parent companies, or branches, or dealers, etc., of many world-famed concerns among our customers: Cities Service Oil Co., National Majestic Radio, Chevrolet Chrysler, Public Utilities Consolidated Corp., United Aluminum Corp., Street Railways Advertising Co., Great American Life Underwriters, and scores of others nationally known. Universities, newspapers, doctors, etc., buy substantial installations and heavy repeat orders.

Customer Guaranteed Cash Profit

Customer gets signed certificate guaranteeing cash profit on his investment. Very few business men are so foolish as to turn down a proposition guaranteed to pay a profit, with proof from leading concerns that it does pay.

Portfolio of References from America's Leading Concerns

Is furnished you. A handsome, impressive portfolio that represents every leading type of business and profession. You show immediate, positive proof of success. Immediately forestalls the argument, "Doesn't fit my business." Shows that it does fit, and does make good. Closes the deal.

Rush the Coupon for Full Information—Territory Filled in Order of Application

If you are looking for a man-size business, free from worries of other overcrowded lines of work, get in touch with us at once. Learn the possibilities now before the franchise for your territory is closed. This specialty is as important a business opportunity today as the typewriter, adding machine, and dictaphone were in their early days. Don't lose valuable time and let this slip away from you. Use the coupon for convenience. It will bring you full information and our proposition immediately.

MAIL FOR FULL INFORMATION

F. E. ARMSTRONG, Pres., Dept. 4066-J, Mobile, Ala.
Without obligation to me, send me full information on your proposition.

Name.....

Street or Route.....

Box No.....

City.....

State.....

PRIVATELY PRINTED

MATURE READERS
AND COLLECTORS OF
AMATORY CURIOSA
OF ALL RACES
SEND FOR FREE CATALOGUE
OF BOOKS ON
SCIENTIFIC SEXUALIA
ANTHROPOLOGICAL
ESOTERICA
UNEXPURGATED CLASSICS
EXOTICALLY ILLUSTRATED
RACIAL ARTS OF LOVE
MAGICA SEXUALIS

LIMITED EDITIONS

All FALSTAFF scientific and anthropological Books on the **Love Relations of Mankind** *are enthralling and highly informative documents by authorities of international repute. That is why the FALSTAFF list of permanent subscribers reads like a "Who's Who" of* **American Sophisticated Intellectual Aristocracy.**

FALSTAFF PRESS

Dept. 1-PP, 230 Fifth Ave., New York, N. Y.

Please send me free illustrated catalogs of Amatory Curiosa.

Name..... *Age*.....

Address.....

City..... *State*.....

FOR MARRIED WOMEN ONLY

Don't be discouraged or alarmed when nature fails you. You can now depend on our new S. P. RELIEF COMPOUND (a Periodic Regulator). Double Strength often relieves unnatural irregularities, difficult cases of long overdue delays generally relieved very quickly. Absolutely not dangerous. No inconvenience. Highly praised and used by thousands of women. We guarantee to ship your order same day received, in plain wrapper. Send $2 box (single strength) $3 for Double Strength, 2 for $5. Trial size 25c. A valuable Hygiene Booklet Free.
Snyder Products Co., Dept. 33-U. 1434 N. Wells St., Chicago

Quit Tobacco

Don't try to banish unaided the hold tobacco has upon you. Thousands of inveterate tobacco users have, with the aid of the Keeley Treatment, found it easy to quit.

KEELEY TREATMENT FOR TOBACCO HABIT Quickly banishes craving for tobacco. Successful for over 50 years. Write today for FREE BOOK and our MONEY BACK GUARANTEE.

Home of the famous Keeley Treatment for Liquor and Drugs. Booklet sent on request. Correspondence strictly confidential.

KEELEY INSTITUTE, Dept. T-901 Dwight, Illinois

Brand New Stuff

TILLIE & MAC

Andy Gump and Min, Boss and Bubbles, Peaches and Browning, Dumb Dora, Maggie and Jiggs, FRENCH STENOGRAPHER, A Bachelor's Dream, Adam and Eve, Elp and Alice, A Model's Life, etc. Original—Night in Paris, A Coachman's Daughter, Toots and Caspar, and over 100 more. Also 72 snappy French type pictures AND in addition 80 Photos Thrilling and Daring Montmartre type including I set men and women in various love poses. Also Women alone in different positions, clear and bright glossy finish. As a special free with order "Advice How to Win at Cards" also "Night Life in Paris" and some short stories. You will receive all the above. Immediate shipment. Send cash, money order or stamps.

SPECIAL—All for $1.00

PARIS IMPORT CO.

4158 PARK AVE., DEPT. Z, NEW YORK CITY

"COME BABY"

LET'S 'STEP OUT' TONIGHT"

It's GREAT to have the zest for fullest enjoyment of living! Don't feel or act old before your time! Life's richest gifts—Health, Success, Love, Popularity, come to MEN and WOMEN who are PHYSICALLY and MENTALLY fit! If you are RUN-DOWN, "under par" and lack fullest abundance of your normal powers; if discouraged or lack a joyful interest in LIFE, then try PRINCESS ANNE STIMULATORS! Astonished users report great benefits! For Men and Women of all ages. Designed for powerful, wholesome stimulation, yet absolutely safe, harmless, containing nothing habit-forming. Price: Regular $2.00 (C.O.D. $2.15). Special Formula, containing vital ingredient, for severe cases $3.00. (C) P. A. Co. 1934)
PRINCESS ANNE CO., Dept. DG-20. Baltimore, Md.

NO MORE WHISKEY DRINKING

An Odorless and Tasteless Treatment When Used as Directed

Any lady can give it secretly at home in tea, coffee or food, and it costs nothing to try! If you have a husband, son, brother, father or friend who is a victim of whiskey, beer or wine, send your name and address to Dr. J. W. Haines Co., 1122 Glenn Bldg., Cincinnati, Ohio, and they will send you absolutely free, in plain wrapper, a trial package of this wonderful treatment. What it has done for others is an example of what it should do for you. Write today and be thankful all your life.

PERIODIC DELAYS AND PAINS RELIEVED

FOR WOMEN ONLY

Keep regular with ZENOME. Unnatural and painful irregularities are discouraging, yet easily relieved by this scientifically prepared Doctor's prescription. Chocolate coated, easy to take, no inconvenience. Send $1 for 24 full-strength tablets. SUPER STRENGTH ZESTO $2. Rushed postpaid plain sealed. ZENOME PRODUCTS CO.
236F West 55th Street, New York

Real Photographs
of
BEAUTIFUL GIRLS
(3 for $1.00)
THE WALL SHOP
P. O. Box 54, Wall St. Station, N. Y. C.

Women! Delayed?

When nature fails use safe reliable MENSTRUA. So powerful POSITIVELY FORCES REMARKABLY SPEEDY RESULTS in many most stubborn unnatural delays, without pain, harm or inconvenience. Especially recommended where ordinary regulators fail, as QUICKER ACTING and much easier assimilated by body. TYPE DOCTORS PREFER. Costs us over 300 percent more than ordinary regulators, but costs you no more! So very costly rarely offered. Not a pill, tablet, powder, paste or liquid Tasteless. GUARANTEED free from habit-forming drugs and narcotics. $2.00. Orders rushed day received in plain sealed box. "PRICELESS INFORMATION TO WOMEN" free on request.
PURITY PRODUCTS CO., 6023 HARPER, DEPT. 9P4, CHICAGO

GET ACQUAINTED CLUB

Established, Reliable, Members everywhere (Many Wealthy.) If lonely, write for sealed particulars.
P. O. BOX 1251 DENVER, COLORADO

EPILEPSY—EPILEPTICS! Detroit lady finds complete relief for husband. Specialists, home—abroad, failed. Nothing to sell. All letters answered. Mrs. Geo. Dempster, Apt. 13, 6900 Lafayette Blvd. West, Detroit, Mich.

LET'S GO PLACES

AND DO THINGS

Feel young again—full of youthful ambition and "pep." Take Rico-Brasil Mate'. It picks you right up. Makes you feel like going places and doing things. Excites muscular activity. Keeps your system free from the poisons that slow you up. No need to act OLD or feel OLD if you use Rico-Brasil Mate'. Improvement noticed in 24 hours. Endorsed by Doctors and Scientists. Months supply for $1.00 by mail, postpaid. With "Folder of Facts" (C.O.D. If Preferred.)
BRASIL COMPANY, Dept. 11, 147 E. 47th St., N. Y. City

NEW STUFF!

WINNIE WINKLE

For men only. Boss and Bubbles, Fannie Hill, Only a Boy, Harold Teen and Lillums, Farmer's Daughter, Papa and Mama, The French Stenographer, The Vampire, The End of Helen, What Tommy Saw Under the Parlor Door, Twelve Gay Love Letters (Read Two Ways), Gay Life in Paris, also 50 rare and Daring French-type pictures (Kind Men Like). Also 50 Montmarte-type pictures of beautiful girls in thrilling poses with their fellows. We fill orders the same day we receive them. All for only $1.00. Send cash, stamps or money order.

NOVELTY IMPORT CO.

DEPT. X 1181 BROADWAY NEW YORK CITY

MARRIED WOMEN'S SECRETS NOW
SEND 25¢ FOR TRIAL SIZE

Don't be discouraged or alarmed when nature fails you. You can now depend on our new O. J. O. RELIEF COMPOUND (a Periodic Regulator) double strength. Often relieves unnatural irregularities, discouraging cases of long overdue delays, generally relieved very quickly. Absolutely not dangerous. No inconvenience. Highly recommended and used by thousands of women for relief. We guarantee to ship orders same day received in plain wrapper, sealed. Send $2.00 box double strength, 3 for $5.00. Triple strength $5.00. Trial size 25c. Don't delay. Send order. FREE Booklet. A personal message to you.
O. J. O. MEDICAL CO., Dept. 214-R. 1434 N. Wells, Chicago

Men! Stimulate Energy, Pep, Physical Powers!

Why suffer from premature loss of Pep? DORAL VIGOR TABS are safe and quick in their action. A GLANDULAR STIMULANT for failing PHYSICAL powers. Take them to TONE UP the entire system—quickly, easily, safely and inexpensively. $1.95 postpaid for 50-time treatment. 3 boxes $5. Super strength $2.95. 2 boxes $5 (C.O.D. 15c extra. Cash only outside U. S.)
DORAL DISTRIBUTORS, Inc.
303 W. 42nd St. Dept. K-37, N. Y. C.

FRENCH PHOTOS *Rare Pictures*

Taken From Life. Front views, rear views, side views. Show everything. Couples in intimate poses; also Group Pictures. And, are they hot! Developed in our own private photographic studios, and sold to grown-ups only. 6 prints for $1.00. 18 prints for $2.00.
RENE NOVELTY SHOP
1403 E. Forest Ave., Dept. 18, Detroit, Mich.

SAVE 50%

Write today for FREE Mail Order price list of Sanitary Necessities of all kinds for men and women. Goods sent in plain sealed envelope, postage paid by us.
P. O. BOX 91, DEPT. D-2, HAMILTON, ONTARIO

ONE WOMAN TO ANOTHER

LADIES END PAIN AND DELAY NOW. Don't be nervous or alarmed when nature fails. Get a married woman's dependable secret. Positively guarantee my successful "Special Relief Compound" is designed to be QUICKER ACTING THAN PILLS OR TABLETS. Differs from others. A favorite compound of physicians for over 20 years. Praised by happily married women everywhere. Relieves some of the longest, stubborn, late appearing unnatural delayed cases in a few days. Mrs. G. "After 3 1-2 days it worked". Mrs. L. W. "I missed several weeks. Only took half a box to get results". Mrs. C. "I was about 6 weeks past, in 5 days I was O. K." Can be taken anywhere. Don't experiment, ORDER NOW. Fast service. Regular package $2.00. Special Formula No. 2 for obstinate conditions $3.00. Private information from a married woman with order. MARTHA BEASLEY, Box 22, Northwestern Station, Dept. 126, Detroit, Michigan.

SNAPPY NEW CARTOON CARDS

Adam and Eve; Dumb Dora; The Butterfly; 32 French type Photos; 14 Pictures young couple before and after marriage; See what Tommy saw under the parlor door; 100 Pictures of girls; 24 Cartoon pictures of men and women. ALL FOR 50c (Money Order). Big Package $1.00. D. MAILWAY, 331-14th St., Brooklyn, N. Y.

HYGIENE FOR MEN

Use SANITUBE to prevent infection. Ask your druggist for the "genuine" SANITUBE, the original Navy Prophylactic.

SEND $1.00 FOR 3
Write for Free Booklet
THE SANITUBE CO., Dept. A. NEWPORT, R. I.

NEW LOW PRICES

TIRE USERS by thousands all over the U.S.A. vouch for LONG, HARD SERVICE, under severest road conditions of our standard brand Tires reconstructed by the ORIGINAL SECRET YORK PROCESS. OUR 18 YEARS in business makes it possible to offer tires at LOWEST PRICES in history with 12 month guarantee.—*Don't Delay—Order Today*

ALL OTHER SIZES IN STOCK

BALLOON TIRES

Size Rim	Tires	Tubes	Size Rim	Tires	Tubes
29x4.40-21	$2.15	$0.85	30x5.25-20	$2.95	1.15
29x4.50-20	2.35	0.85	31x5.25-21	3.25	1.15
30x4.50-21	2.40	0.85	28x5.50-18	3.35	1.15
28x4.75-19	2.45	0.95	29x5.50-19	3.35	1.15
29x4.75-20	2.50	0.95	30x5.00-18	3.40	1.15
29x5.00-19	2.85	1.05	31x5.00-19	3.40	1.15
30x5.00-20	2.85	1.05	32x6.00-20	3.45	1.25
28x5.25-18	2.90	1.15	33x6.00-21	3.65	1.25
29x5.25-19	2.95	1.15	32x6.50-20	3.75	1.35

REGULAR CORD TIRES

Size	Tires	Tubes	Size	Tires	Tubes
30x3	$2.25	$0.65	32x4½	$3.35	1.15
30x3½	2.35	0.75	33x4½	3.45	1.15
31x4	2.95	0.85	34x4½	3.45	1.15
32x4	2.95	0.85	30x5	3.65	1.35
33x4	2.95	0.85	33x5	3.75	1.45
34x4	3.25	0.85	35x5	3.95	1.55

HEAVY DUTY TRUCK TIRES

Size	Tires	Tubes
30x5 Truck	$4.25	$1.95
34x5 Truck	4.25	2.00
32x6 8 ply. Truck	7.95	2.75
32x6 10 ply. Truck	8.95	2.75
36x6 Truck	9.95	3.95
34x7 Truck	10.95	3.95
36x8 Truck	12.45	4.25
40x8 Truck	15.95	4.95

FREE! TUBE WITH EACH 2 TIRES

ALL TUBES NEW HEAVY GAUGE CIRCULAR-MOLDED

ORDER NOW BEFORE OFFER EXPIRES

SEND ONLY $1.00 DEPOSIT with each tire ordered. ($4.00 deposit on each Truck Tire.) We ship balance C.O.D. Deduct 5 per cent if cash is sent in full with order. ALL TUBES BRAND NEW — GUARANTEED. Tires failing to give 12 months' service replaced at half price.

DEALERS WANTED NRA

YORK TIRE & RUBBER CO.
3855-59 Cottage Grove Ave. Dept. 770 A Chicago

WHISKEY HABIT HELP HIM QUIT

Send for FREE TRIAL of Noxalco, a guaranteed harmless home treatment. Can be given secretly in food or drink to anyone who drinks or craves Gin, Whiskey, Home Brew, Wine, Moonshine, etc. Your request for Free Trial brings a trial supply by return mail and full $2.00 treatment which you may try under a 30 day refund guarantee. Try Noxalco at our risk. ARLEE CO., Dept. H-81 BALTIMORE, MD.

PATENTS

HAVE YOU AN IDEA?

• Other men have read and profited by our free book "PATENT PROTECTION." Fully explains many interesting points to inventors and illustrates important mechanical principles. With book we also send free "Evidence of Invention" form. Prompt service, reasonable fees, deferred payments, thirty-five years' experience. Avoid risk of delay. Write immediately to: VICTOR J. EVANS & CO., Registered Patent Attorneys, 621-K, Victor Building, Washington, D. C.

The Forbidden Secrets of Sex are Daringly Revealed!

AWAY with false modesty! At last a famous doctor has told *all* the secrets of sex in frank, daring language. No prudish beating about the bush, no veiled hints, but TRUTH, blazing through 576 pages of straightforward facts.

Love is the most *magnificent ecstacy* in the world . . . know how to hold your loved one . . . don't glean half-truths from unreliable sources. Now you can know how to end ignorance...fear...and self denial!

MORE THAN 100 VIVID PICTURES

The 106 illustrations leave nothing to the imagination . . . know how to overcome physical mismating . . . know what to do on your wedding night to avoid the torturing results of ignorance.

Everything pertaining to sex is discussed in daring language. All the things you have wanted to know about your sex life, information about which other books only vaguely hint, is yours at last.

Some will be offended by the amazing frankness of this book and its vivid illustrations, but the world has no longer any use for prudery and false modesty.

A FAMOUS JUDGE SAYS THAT MOST DIVORCES ARE CAUSED BY SEX IGNORANCE!

Normal, sex-suited young people are torn apart because they lack sex knowledge.

WHAT EVERY MAN SHOULD KNOW

- The Sexual Embrace
- Secrets of the Honeymoon
- Mistakes of Early Marriage
- Homosexuality
- Venereal Diseases
- How to Regain Virility
- Sexual Starvation
- Glands and Sex Instinct
- To Gain Greater Delight
- The Truth About Abuse

WHAT EVERY WOMAN SHOULD KNOW

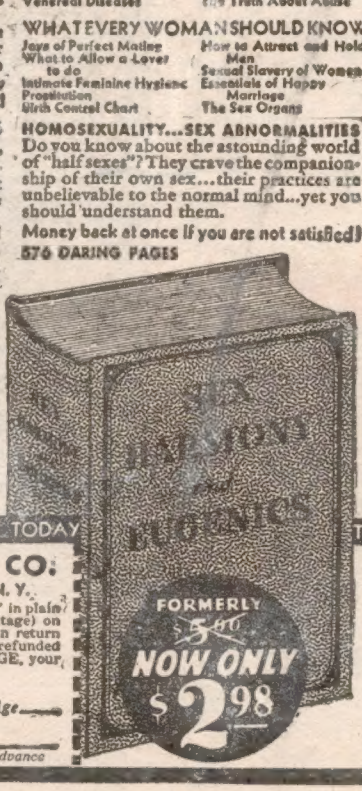
- Joys of Perfect Mating
- What to Allow a Lover to do
- Intimate Feminine Hygiene
- Prostitution
- Birth Control Chart
- How to Attract and Hold Men
- Sexual Slavery of Women
- Essentials of Happy Marriage
- The Sex Organs

HOMOSEXUALITY...SEX ABNORMALITIES

Do you know about the astounding world of "half sexes"? They crave the companionship of their own sex...their practices are unbelievable to the normal mind...yet you should understand them.

Money back at once if you are not satisfied!

576 DARING PAGES



Don't be a *slave* to ignorance and fear. Enjoy the rapturous delights of the perfect physical love!

Lost love . . . scandal . . . divorce . . . can often be prevented by knowledge. Only the ignorant pay the *awful penalties* of wrong sex practices. Read the facts, clearly, startlingly told . . . study these illustrations and grope in darkness no longer.

You want to know . . . and you *should* know *everything* about sex. Sex is no longer a sin . . . a mystery . . . it is your greatest power for happiness. You owe it to yourself . . . to the one you love, to tear aside the curtain of hypocrisy and learn the *naked truth!*

ATTRACT THE OPPOSITE SEX!

Know *how to enjoy* the thrilling experiences that are your birthright . . . know how to attract the opposite sex . . . how to hold love.

There is no longer any need to pay the *awful price* for one moment of bliss. Read the scientific pathological facts told so bravely by Dr. Rubin. The chapters on venereal disease are alone worth the price of the book.

IS SEX IGNORANCE DRIVING THE ONE YOU LOVE INTO THE ARMS OF ANOTHER?

Let "Sex Harmony" teach you how easy it is to win and hold your loved one!

SEND NO MONEY • • • MAIL COUPON TODAY

PIONEER PUBLISHING CO.

Dept. 980 1270 Sixth Ave., New York, N. Y.

Please send me, "Sex Harmony and Eugenics" in plain wrapper. I will pay the postman $2.98 (plus postage) on delivery. If I am not completely satisfied, I can return the book and the entire purchase price will be refunded immediately. Also send me, FREE OF CHARGE, your book on "Why Birth Control?"

Name_____ Age____

Address_____

Orders from Foreign Countries 15 Shillings in Advance

THIS BOOK NOT SOLD TO MINORS

FREE! NEW BOOK "WHY BIRTH CONTROL?"

This startling book discusses birth control in an entirely new way — Tells you many things about a much discussed subject. "Why Birth Control" — will be a revelation to you — Sent free to all those who order "Sex Harmony and Eugenics" at the reduced price $2.98.

PIONEER PUBLISHING CO.
Radio City
1270 Sixth Ave., New York, N.Y.

"I'll PROVE in Only 7 Days *that I Can Make* YOU a New Man!"

No other Physical Instructor in the World has ever DARED make such an Offer.

Photo by Joel Feder.

By CHARLES ATLAS

Holder of the Title:
"The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man"
Won in open competition in the only National and International contests held during the past 15 years.

I HAVE proved to thousands that my system of building powerful, big-muscled men begins to show real results *in only 7 days*—and I can prove it to *you*.

You don't have to take my word for it. You don't have to take the word of my hundreds of pupils who have added inches to their chests, biceps, neck, thighs and calves in only a few days. No sir! You can prove for *yourself*—in just one week—by the change you see and *feel* in *your own body*—that you can actually become a husky, healthy NEW MAN—a real "Atlas Champion."

All I want to know is: Where do *you* want big, powerful muscles? How many pounds of firm flesh do *you* want distributed over your body to fill you out? Where do *you* lack vitality, pep, and robust health? Where do *you* want to take off flabby, surplus fat?

Just tell me, give me a week, and I'll show you that I can make a *New Man* of you, give you bodily power and drive, and put you in that magnificent physical condition which wins you the envy and respect of any man and the admiration of every woman.

My own system of *Dynamic-Tension* does it. That's the way I built myself from a 97-pound weakling to "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man." And now *you* can have a big, balanced muscular development like mine in the same easy way.

No "Apparatus" Needed!

You begin to FEEL and SEE the difference in your physical condition at once, without using any tricky weights or pulleys, any pills, "rays," or unnatural dieting. My *Dynamic-Tension* is a *natural* method of developing you *inside and out*. It not only makes you an "Atlas Champion," but goes after such conditions as constipation, pimples, skin blotches, and any other conditions that keep you from really enjoying life and its good times—and it starts getting rid of them at once.

Let Me Tell You How

Gamble a stamp today by mailing the coupon for a free copy of my new illustrated book, *"Everlasting Health and Strength."* It tells you all about my special *Dynamic-Tension* method. It shows you, from actual photos, how I have developed my pupils to the same perfectly balanced proportions of my own physique, by my own secret methods. What my system did for me, and these hundreds of others, it can do for you too. Don't keep on being only 25 or 50 per cent of the man you *can* be! Find out what I can do for you.

Send for FREE BOOK

Where shall I send your copy of "Everlasting Health and Strength"? Write your name and address plainly on the coupon, and mail it today. Your own new 'Atlas body" is waiting for you. This book tells you how easy it is to get my way. Send the coupon to me personally.

CHARLES ATLAS
Dept. 83-J
133 E. 23rd St.
New York City

Charles Atlas—As He Is Today

CHARLES ATLAS,
Dept. 83-J
133 E. 23rd St., N. Y. C.

I want the proof that your system of *Dynamic-Tension* will make a New Man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscle development. Send me your free book, *"Everlasting Health and Strength."*

Name .....
(Please print or write plainly)

Address .....

City ..... State .....

© 1934, C. A. Ltd.

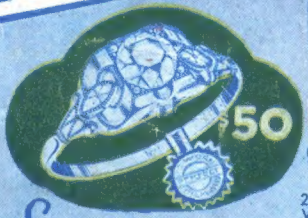
Shop by MAIL and SAVE

Jewelry BARGAINS

$1 BRINGS YOUR CHOICE
10 MONTHS TO PAY
10 DAY FREE TRIAL
MONEY BACK *if not* SATISFIED

$29.50

127. Gorgeous Engagement Ring. 18K white gold; brilliant diamond in center. 2 other diamonds. Prong design.
$2.85 a month



$50

Sworn PERFECT DIAMOND

80. Beautiful Prong Engagement Ring; 18K white gold. High quality SWORN PERFECT Diamond. Each diamond examined by an expert and its perfection attested by an affidavit sworn to by a Notary Public. These diamonds conform with the Federal Trade Commission's ruling of a perfect diamond—without spots, flaws or carbon. $4.90 a month

$29.75

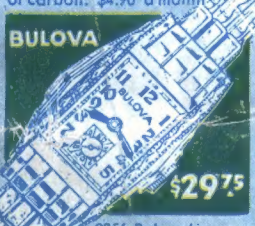
280. All Diamond Heart Wedding Ring at low price. Beautifully engraved 18K white gold each diamond set in attractive heart form.
$2.88 a month

$11.95

1123. Ladies Birthstone Ring; 10K white gold; diamond on each side of birthstone. Mention month of birth.
$1.10 a month

$15.95

1249. Massive 10K gold initial Ring for men. 2 diamonds and initials cut out in gold mounting on genuine black onyx. Mention initials.
$1.50 a month



$29.75

2356. Bulova's newest feature—the new "Ambassador". Attractive watch for men; engraved case; 15-jewel movement. 3 strand flexible metal band. $2.88 a month

$15.95

1805. Slender, dainty Baguette; 7-jewel movement. Latest style link band. Watches of this kind have sold for as high as $25. It's a beauty — Examine it.
$1.50 a month

$1.90 a month

$17.95

2110. Smart looking Waltham Watch for men. Numerals on case with enameled background; 7-jewel movement. Leather strap.

$24.75

1521. Bulova's "Miss America" — a slender, dainty Baguette at last year's low price. Guaranteed 7-jewel movement. Engraved or plain case.
$2.38 a month

Back again with Good Times . . . America's largest Mail Order Credit Jewelers with reputation for 56 years of fair dealings offer these jewelry bargains at special introductory prices on liberal credit terms under YOUR MONEY BACK GUARANTEE. You'll save by shopping direct by mail.

WHAT YOU DO

Send only $1.00, giving name, address, number of article desired and a brief note stating: (1) Age (must be over 20) (2) Occupation (3) Employer and other facts about yourself. All information confidential; no direct inquiries made.

WHAT WE DO

Upon arrival of your order, we will open a 10-month Charge Account and send selection for your approval and 10-Day Free Trial. If satisfied you pay balance in 10 equal monthly payments. Otherwise return and your money will be refunded.

CASH for OLD GOLD

Your Old Gold Rings, watch cases, etc. are worth 50% more. Send by Registered Mail — Cash sent immediately. Merchandise held 10 days for approval.

Complete Catalog of Diamonds, Watches, jewelry, silverware, all on 10-month terms—sent upon request.

FREE to Adults

S. W. Sweet Inc.

Dept. 14J 1670 BROADWAY · · NEW YORK